OVERLORD 16 The Half-Elf God-kin | Part II Kugane Maruyama

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Kugane Maruyama
Illustration by so-bin

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Chapter 4 Life in the Village

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Ainz walked towards the Dark Elf village with Mare in tow.

Mare was wearing the male attire that Ainz had lent him instead of his usual feminine wear. Just like the ones he had lent to Aura, these were just simple clothes that didn't have any data in them and thus, no magic.

This world's clothes wouldn't automatically adjust to fit the wearer unless imbued with magic, but it's different for the clothes from YGGDRASIL and so they fit Mare to a tee. They just had to be careful in a battle with these clothes due to the absolute drop in defensive stats compared to their usual outfits.

Ainz actually thought about having them wear something else at first because of this.

He had already heard from the twins' that Bukubukuchagama prepared a lot of items for them aside from their normal gear.

But, was there really anything suitable among those items to hide their status and true strength in the place they were heading to? Ainz could only shake his head in disappointment. Most of them were things like Aura's animal suit armor or Mare's dress armor; things Ainz would consider as fetish gear. That was how

Ainz ended up providing the clothes for them.

In the first place, this was Ainz's plan, so it stood to reason that he should be the one to provide the things necessary.

That didn't mean they were all wearing similar outfits in this case. Mare and Ainz's outfits had one big difference from Aura's.

The two of them were covering their lower faces with cloth, like they were wearing a mask. There was also the bandanna covering their foreheads, so only the area around their eyes could be seen.

Although he felt sorry for making Mare bear with the additional heat, Ainz needed him to do this for his sake.

They found Aura waiting for them at the entrance of the village; though the village didn't really have a place that could be called an entrance. She was not here because she saw them coming or because she was at the right place at the right time through sheer luck. It was because they had already contacted her with a [Message].

Behind Aura stood her group of fanatical Dark Elves. It's rare for the Dark Elves, who spent their daily lives on trees, to be seen standing on the ground like Aura. It was still a dangerous place, even if it was near the village. They were probably doing it because of the trust they had in the strongest person around—Aura—or maybe it was because they wanted to be in close proximity to the one they adored, as much as possible.

There were other Dark Elves gathered on the bridges spanning the trees, looking down at Ainz and the others. Everyone seemed to be talking with the people beside them. Although he couldn't hear the content of their conversations, he was sure they were talking about them.

"Ooo-ncle! Mare!"

Aura, feeling a little embarrassed, greeted them loudly so the gathered Elves could hear it as well. Ainz responded with a wide smile.

He wanted to retort with "I am not an Oncle!" but suppressed the urge, not wanting to mock Aura's mistake.

(T/N: Originally Aura started with an "Oooh" and segued into "Oo-oji-san" (grand uncle) in Japanese, to which Ainz wanted to retort with "I am not your grand uncle". Decided to change it as it couldn't be TLed into English perfectly.)

"Yoo, Aura! Uncle's here!"

Ainz replied in a cheery voice and waved back after putting down the luggage he had been carrying on his back. Then, he lightly patted the shy boy standing

next to him on his back.

"Y-yes". Mare gave a brief wave as well. He greeted her with a "sister…" but it's very unlikely that they heard his shy muttering.

Still, it didn't matter if his voice was too quiet. All they wanted was to let everyone know that the man and the boy—Aura's relatives—had arrived.

Well, they need not have waved their hands to show how close their relationship was, but it's not like it would cause any issues either.

Perhaps they had succeeded in their act, because the Dark Elves just continued to watch them silently even as they approached Aura.

"Mmm, with that settled, please allow me to escort—I will show you around"

Ainz grinned upon seeing Aura so troubled and tense. Her face was twitching as she tried to make a smile. Seeing a side of Aura different from how she usually was, warm fluffy thoughts like "She is so cute" and "I want to pat her head" flashed through Ainz's mind—then he immediately calmed down.

"—No. Nn…"

The reply unintentionally came out a little cold, so he cleared his throat and made his voice sound cheery again like before.

"…I have to thank these people for taking care of you, you see. Did you borrow a house somewhere?"

Aura gave an exaggerated nod.

"Then why don't you head over there with Mare? I will catch up later"

"Yes, Und—no, Okay?"

His present role was that of Aura's uncle.

Incidentally, the three of them racked their brains about who he was supposed to be: was he Bukubukuchagama's older or younger brother? If he was the latter, then was he older than Peroroncino or younger? In the end, Ainz took on the role of the younger brother of both Bukubukuchagama and Peroroncino.

Aura, who should have been acting accordingly, ended up fumbling around not knowing how to interact with him. Maybe it was because she didn't have enough time to prepare as she was sent to the village earlier, or maybe she hadn't resigned herself to their situation yet, but it seems like she couldn't play the role perfectly yet.

"Hahaha. Take Mare with you then. The journey wasn't that long but let Mare have some rest."

"Y-yes! Understood!"

Perhaps Aura had finally settled on some plan in her mind, as she gave an energetic reply. However, he felt like she had just given up on the character.

Ainz's gaze followed the twins, who were walking away, for a while and then shifted his gaze to the gathered Dark Elves.

There were a lot of people here.

The elders were not here yet, but the gathering was already over half of the village's population. There were also some children among them. He didn't feel any ill will from them, probably due to how much they benefited from Aura's help. That said, there were still some strong gazes that were appraising him, trying to understand what kind of person Aura's uncle was.

It's that Aura fanatic and his followers.

Ainz felt that there was something off about them.

Although he arrived after her with her brother, he was an adult who had sent a child, Aura, out alone into the forest. It was entirely reasonable for people with common sense to have that expression upon seeing him.

Therefore, Ainz wouldn't have felt anything off if a normal Dark Elf—someone who's not an Aura fanatic—made that expression.

But these guys were different.

These were the ones that said things like age didn't matter if someone was talented. They of all people should have found it logical that he would send a superbly skilled ranger ahead alone.

In that case—

—those gazes have another meaning behind them, Ainz thought, and after contemplating for a while, he arrived at an answer that matched. *...Aah, maybe they are wondering if she was just being taken advantage of by an incompetent uncle. That's probably the reason for that look in their eyes...uuummm, it's vexing that they are not exactly off the mark. Oops...I should begin soon.*

He had gotten a large enough audience. It was useless to spend more time waiting and he didn't want to let their accumulated curiosity cool down if possible.

It's been a long time...

Ainz felt a little tense. Idly wondering if this was how a lecturer in the classroom or a conductor on a stage would feel, he started to speak to the Dark Elves gathered on the trees in a cheery voice, just like the one he used in the orchestrated act he put on before.

"Now that's settled—"

Ainz removed the cloth covering the lower half of his face and displayed what was underneath it.

He showed them a smile and immediately covered his face like before.

"—I apologize. My tribe's tradition dictates that men have to cover their faces like this. Even if covering one's face is considered rude here, please forgive me for not removing it."

No voices of discontent arose from the audience. It seemed like they had accepted Ainz's explanation.

Of course, it was a huge lie.

Ainz wore a rubber mask on his face and had cast an illusion over it Momon-style, but it was only a low-level illusion so rangers with sharp senses might be able to see through it if they looked closely enough. This excuse was to cover up the faults in his disguise.

He hoped that it would be hard to see through the illusion just from the area around his eyes alone.

"Well then—pleased to meet you. Seems like you took care of my Aura... She may have already told you about me, but my name is Ain Bell Fior"

He stated his name, which was thought up by all three of them after exhausting their brains. Well, in reality, the twins' did most of the thinking and he just received the name from them.

"I've brought a few meager gifts with me. Would anyone lend me a table please?"

Suddenly, he saw a nearby tree wriggle a bit before branches grew from it rapidly, wide enough to spread the luggage on it. Someone in the crowd probably used magic.

"Thank you," Ainz gave his gratitude and lifted the luggage from the ground onto the table.

"I don't know if they will be to your liking but I would be glad if you would accept them."

Ainz thought a lot about what he should bring as gifts.

Seeing the elves in Nazarick eat its food with relish, he thought about bringing condiments like salt. Even Ainz knew that salt was something no dish could do without.

So, he initially planned to bring lumps of rock salt with him but realized that although salt was essential for humans, that might not be the case for the Dark Elves.

Even if it was essential, it could be the case that the Dark Elves required it far less than humans. In that case, its worth would be reduced in their eyes.

Also, as Ainz found out, they didn't seem to use anything similar to salt in their cooking sessions—at least not during the ones he snooped on. He also didn't see any Elves salting their meat. That they had the magic to prevent their meat from spoiling was probably a major reason why they didn't.

Maybe they actually did use salt, but only on the rare occasion because they found it precious? That didn't seem to be the case either.

Well, it's not like he could go around checking all of the kitchens for salt just because he could use [Perfect Unknowable].

Considering this absence of salt and how they didn't waste the blood of their prey, perhaps they were satisfying their need for salts from the blood as carnivores do.

Incidentally, because E-Rantel didn't have anything like rock salt mines or salt lakes, their salt was produced by the magic casters who were proficient in domestic magic. They also imported some from the Empire and the Kingdom. That's why he was told the price of salt increased a bit for a while under his rule, but that no longer seemed to be an issue.

Ainz vaguely remembered reading something like that from the documents that passed by him. Albedo had probably dealt with it.

Anyhow, Ainz decided not to bring salt.

In its place—

"These are metal knives created by dwarves, you see? Splendid, right? I heard that you make some very strong ones here from trees using magic but they probably aren't stronger than metal, right? These are made by dwarves who are especially good at smithing. They are first-rate stuff."

The first thing he took out from the bag was a slender and thin wooden box that held a cleaver in it. He followed with arrowheads and cutlery knives, arranging them neatly on the table.

This was a trade fair, to bring foreign exchange to the Dwarven Country which was under the Sorcerer Kingdom's economic sphere.

Of course, this village which was self-sufficient didn't have the coin to pay. A method to bring foreign currency into this village would have to be prepared in this case, but Ainz thought that this was a chance for the Sorcerer kingdom to act as their intermediary and thus bring them under its economic sphere as well.

The issue was that he didn't discuss this plan with Albedo.

—I don't expect a plan thought up by my useless brain will go smoothly, but it's not like there's anything to lose...there's not, right?

So, there's no problem even if it failed, but he would be praised if it succeeded. Ainz held such hopes privately, but he knew that the greater the anticipation, the greater the disappointment would be when he failed. So he tried not to think too much about it.

It won't be an issue at all even if they were to say "we don't need it." I only brought them out of goodwill so it would just end with a "sorry that it's not to your liking." But...the mood seems good.

The eyes of the Dark Elves around him were sparkling. The first to speak was the Master of the Hunt.

"Can I take a look?"

"Please, please. Go ahead and feel it in your hands"

Approaching Ainz, he first reached for the arrowheads. A natural choice. He would be a little surprised if the Master of the Hunt reached for the cleaver first instead.

"Splendid work. I heard the Dwarves are a race that live in the mountains, so they really can make such fine things... These are valuable goods, correct? What could be a good barter for this ..."

...Ooh, just like I predicted.

The businessman Suzuki Satoru chuckled to himself.

He managed to give a successful presentation of the things his audience wanted.

Some of the Elves still used currency as the Elven Royal Capital used to trade with human society before the breakdown of their relationship, but it's doubtful if such a remote village participated in that trade or even had Elven peddlers visit this place either. Therefore, bartering was the norm here. Just as he had expected, "rare and excellent goods" like these were greatly welcomed.

"...I brought these not to barter, but to give them to everyone. Please distribute them as you like later."

The Master of the Hunt, who was checking the sharpness of the arrowheads with his hand, made a bitter expression.

"No, we are the ones who are indebted to your niece, Fiora-dono. To receive these without giving anything in return..."

"No, no. These are meager gifts, a mark of our affection and gratitude. Please accept them, but if you want to barter for something...I have magic items that

were produced using a splendid technique of Dwarves called runes."

Ainz can feel the sparkle in the Master of the Hunt's eyes intensify.

"Runes? A magic item you say?"

"Yes, that's right. It's a magic item created using runes. I am using it myself, but depending on the barter I will consider it. According to them, it's just a rudimentary thing but I can't give away a magic item for free. Plus, it was originally somewhat pricey as well."

Selling things cheaply brought customers, but if it went too far, it might end up creating a class of customers who would refuse to buy anything if they were not cheap enough.

Dwarves could sell it however cheap they wanted to, but that's not the case for Ainz. In fact, he should sell it at as high of a price as possible here. The issue was that this village didn't have anything he wanted. No—there could be something Ainz just didn't know about yet.

Frankly speaking, Runecraft™ hasn't brought any good results yet, and there is not much demand for it either. But, it's too hasty to come to a conclusion yet, even though it's an unprofitable department. I have to take the long-term view on it, say, about a hundred years.

"That said, I don't think a village like this with a lot of druids would need it."

With such a disclaimer, Ainz took out a metal stick from his pocket. He was already prepared to present it like this so there was no hesitation in his actions.

"This thing lights a short flame at its tip. It's more for use as a fire starter instead of a light source because the flame will disappear if it leaves your hand."

As he did not hear a negative response like "what, that's it?" Ainz felt a bit relieved.

"I also have a few others, but that's for later. I am hoping I can join the kids in the temporary lodgings soon to relieve some of the journey's exhaustion."

The gathered Dark Elves made empathetic expressions.

While they didn't travel far from their village, they knew how dangerous the place they lived in was. They understood the need to take a rest after traveling through that.

"—Sorry for asking you this while you are exhausted, but can you answer two questions?"

"Yes, please"

It's that Aura fanatic named Plum.

Ainz turned serious. If he answered wrong, there was a possibility that the guy

would turn into their enemy. On the other hand, if he gave an answer they wanted, he would become a strong ally.

"The first one is...do you have any Elf blood flowing through you?"

"Oi, you are being rud—"

Master of the Hunt tried to stop him but Ainz waved his hand slightly, expressing that he didn't mind it.

"It's fine. No one has said that to me before...but does that look to be the case?"

"Ah, no, don't mind it then. It just felt like that."

"Is that so?"

Sharp.

Incredibly sharp.

Ainz was currently using the face of some elf he saw in the Royal Capital, with only the skin color changed to match the Dark Elves. Ainz thought it was perfect and even Mare didn't find any problem with it, but for genuine Dark Elves his face probably looked uncanny, enough to sense it just from the area around his eyes.

"...I've never heard of anything like that from my parents, but if you feel that way, maybe some of my ancestors married Elves in the distant past...and the other question is?"

"Fiora-sama is extremely talented as a ranger, but are you the same?"

So he would attach "-sama" to the niece's name even when he was talking with her uncle. Feeling a strange sense of admiration at his staunchness, Ainz wondered whether he should ask why he was attaching "-sama" to his niece's name, or was it better to not broach that topic?

He couldn't decide which was the correct option, but he should answer his question first.

"No, I do not have talent as a ranger like that child, but I am confident in my ability as a first-class wizard."

"...uizaad?"

"Yes, Wizard."

Plum's eyes darted around.

Ah, he looks like someone who doesn't know what a wizard is...is that even possible? No, a wizard is someone who acquires and uses magic through learning. In a place like this without an education system, it's unlikely someone like that could appear...right? Well, then maybe it's reasonable that they don't know?

He didn't really know the exact reason behind this lack of knowledge, but if it

was as he had expected, then he just had to make the other party understand.

"I mean, an arcane-type magic caster."

"Arcane...I see. I see. That's awesome. As expected of Fiora-sama's uncle."

He felt like he could hear the guy thinking, *well, I don't really understand, but it sounds awesome so let's praise him anyway*. But, that's fine. He was used to getting fanatically praised for everything in Nazarick, so much so that such an obviously blunt way of getting praised was rather refreshing.

"Aa—, Seems like my explanation was not good enough. Wizard is...a job that uses magic, like druids."

"Ooh! I see! Then you can create food too?"

"Eh? Ah, no, sorry. There are also wizards like that...I heard, but unfortunately, I can't do that. To be specific, I am more proficient in magic that eliminates enemies."

He remembered hearing that domestic magic could create condiments and spices, but wondered if it could also do high-quality foodstuffs.

Even if they thought of him as incompetent because he couldn't do that, he wouldn't mind it. He knew himself to be mediocre, so if the other party thought him as incompetent then it would just be a reflection of his own thoughts.

Rather, he would even feel happy if that was how they saw him.

But—he couldn't let himself be thought of as incompetent while he was acting as Aura's uncle. Ainz was currently standing in for Bukubukuchagama after all.

"Enemies...I see...then you can hunt, right? I understand. As expected of Fiora-sama's relatives."

This guy was supposed to be a genuine hunter, so what the hell was he talking about, Ainz wondered.

Taking down external threats was probably a part of a hunter's duty in this village, but that would not be the only one. Returning with food from the dangerous forest would be their primary work. If taking down enemies was enough for one to be called a hunter, then this village should have been filled with fully-armored burly-looking warriors instead.

But Ainz, who was neither a hunter nor one of the villagers, couldn't point it out to him. It would be bothersome if he ended up hurting the other party's feelings.

Aura and Mare would be living here for a while so he couldn't go around creating discord with the villagers. No amount of apologizing to the twins would be enough if his arrival made them look bad in the villagers' eyes. He would feel

even more guilty because, even if that were to happen, Aura would surely say "don't worry about it" with sincerity.

Anyhow, it was better to explain it clearly and get a verbal acknowledgment from him. He didn't want to be accused of lying or some other things later. After all, the twins would be constantly aware of his actions here. The circle of Nazarick's most intelligent people would probably conclude with a "sasuga!" even if Ainz made some idiotic mistake, but he was scared that the children would ask him "why did you do that? Please tell us" innocently. He didn't want to use the "think for yourself" card with a child.

While Ainz was having such thoughts in rapid succession, Plum nodded like he understood it more or less, and finally replied.

"Really, that's great. Splendid!"

Was it really so splendid? Ainz wondered, but he was fine with it if that's how it looked to the other party. This situation wasn't bad either. Ainz decided to go with the flow.

"I am not too confident about my hunting skills as I have never hunted, but I am happy that a skilled hunter from this village thinks so about me." With this, they would be the one responsible for calling him a hunter and expecting good hunting skills from him. "That kid is probably helping you with the hunts...I think, but let me take over that duty from her. Can you let those two play in the village meanwhile?"

Plum made an expression like he just heard something preposterous. Ainz didn't think he had said anything particularly strange and tried to recollect his words, but he couldn't find anything wrong with them.

"I came here hoping to let those city kids experience life in a Dark Elf village, so I want them to experience something they can't in the city...right, like the games the children in this village play, if possible."

"I see. So life in a city is a lot different from the village, huh."

The Master of the Hunt nodded in understanding. Ainz was unsure what city life looked like in the Master of the Hunt's mind, but he was not responsible for the other party's own misunderstandings. He might have lied a little, but he was not exactly wrong either. He could make any number of excuses even if he was solicited about it later.

"—Can I ask a question as well?"

The one who spoke was a man who looked like a ranger, standing on the walkway. That was true for all the Elves here but he had quite a pretty face, it

would be appropriate to describe him as “cool.”

“Please go ahead.”

Ainz was not happy about this and didn’t want to get questioned at all if possible, but he couldn’t say that to his face.

The elf hesitated a bit before asking his question.

“Does Fiora-dono have a fiance?”

“Fuaah?” Ainz nearly exclaimed before suppressing himself. The question came out of nowhere.

After he became flustered at why the hell would this man ask such a weird question, Ainz observed the people around him. Like him, they were also surprised.

...Seems like he is acting on his own. That aside, why is he even interested in Aura’s fiance...? He wants to know if there’s someone in the city we came from...Fuu. There’s nothing to think about. There can only be one reason for his interest.

Ainz felt confident that he understood the intention behind the question. In fact, there could be no other reason behind it.

He wants to have Aura’s bloodline in this village. I am sure I saw a few boys among the children.

Ainz glanced at the children for just a moment. There were many boys just as he had expected.

Does he have a son among them? ...It’s really hard to know a Dark Elf’s age from their appearance, isn’t it? But, the thought of their marriage never crossed my mind till now. Well, isn’t it fine if there’s someone who Aura likes? I’ll need to make sure that person is decent first though, as Bukubukuchagama’s stand-in! ...Oops, going on the tangents again. I will have to decide if I will lie here or tell the truth.

But he didn’t even need to think about it. Telling him the truth wouldn’t hurt them at all. Instead, they would have to follow with lie after lie if he lied here.

“...No, there’s no one like that right now.”

“Is that so.”

The man looked a little relieved.

...Is he the type who interferes too much in their children’s choice of a partner? This is bad. I came here to make friends for the twins. It would be bothersome if this guy pushed his son front-and-center while making it hard for the other children to approach the twins. I have to figure out more about this...

“...By the way...can I ask for your name?”

The guy immediately put forward a crisp appearance.

"I am named Blueberry Egnia."

Ainz knew about a food called blueberry. Like that Plum guy from before, maybe it's a Dark Elf tradition to prefix their name with a food's name. In that case, he should have just given Aura a fake name as well instead of worrying about how she would feel getting called by a fake name by her potential friends. What troubled him was that he didn't know if their native names for the fruits were getting translated into something he knew, or if they were just using the same names without knowing their meaning—that these were traces left behind by Players.

"...I see. I will keep it in mind. Blueberry Egnia-san right?"

"Yes. That's right. Thanks for trying to keep me in your mind."

Ainz didn't understand why he was being thanked.

Before Ainz could ask him, a small commotion started among the Dark Elves.

Ainz immediately understood the reason for the change. Looking towards where the Dark Elves' attention gathered, he found the elders as expected.

He could hear a few voices around him asking, "why are they so late?"

Ainz sighed internally. This was going to be troublesome, just like when Aura visited.

Is there any company where the employees would bad-mouth each other in front of outsiders? People sometimes grumbled, but they would never hurl insults...I think? Umu. Is it fine to let Aura stay in this village? ...or should I just hope that the children will not get pulled into this? But how would those children behave after hearing their parents bad-mouth others? I don't know...Anyhow, I should make sure my actions don't adversely affect Aura and Mare.

He could guess what was going to happen now, but he didn't want to stick his head in unnecessary trouble. He only wanted to maintain their neutrality,

so he would need to respond skillfully in this situation. That meant—

I just have to mimic my simulations to a T!

Well, come at me, Ainz postured internally. One of the elders started speaking, ignoring the stares around him.

"One from the same descent as the sapling Fiora. You did good to travel here from a faraway place."

Sapling? Just as I thought.

Ainz grinned mentally.

It was the Dark Elf way of speaking. In this world, the words of various races

were translated into something Ainz could understand. The fact that this word "sapling" was translated as such meant that there was no hidden meaning behind it. If it meant young boy or girl, it would have been translated into the words Ainz knew. So, prefixing "sapling" to the children's names was no more than a convention.

They probably started with a Dark Elf-style phrase to estimate how knowledgeable he was, as a Dark Elf adult living in the city.

From Aura's investigations—and Ainz's eavesdropping—they knew that there were two factions in this village; one faction placed importance on traditions like the elders and while the other was filled with youngsters who wanted to be free from those shackles. The elders probably wanted to see which faction Ainz and his ilk—Dark Elves who lived in a city—were more amenable to.

...I want to maintain distance from both factions. We might end up getting pulled into a faction if I was to say something careless here. If we were to decide to join one, I think the faction liked by the parents of the children Aura and Mare will be playing with—probably the youngster faction—would be the better choice. But, I am not sure if that's the right faction...there's just not enough information. Evading them by saying something appropriate and insisting that's how we normally greet is probably the best course of action here.

Ainz already expected something like this, so he was prepared beforehand.

"—As a traveler who treads the same earth, I offer my gratitude to you, denizens of this forest, for your hospitality toward us, travelers from a far-flung forest."

Ainz said something that sounded authentic without thinking too much about it. The elders blinked once and then sighed with an "ooh".

That certainly was not the sign of a bad impression. In fact, he could sense that his words got a good reception.

"Both the Sawtooth and Ring-Cupped Oaks are similarly sturdy, and both are majestic in their rise towards the heavens. I am satisfied. If the trees continue to flourish, they will certainly give birth to a forest someday."

Ainz spoke without a hitch and finally nodded in satisfaction.

Frankly speaking, even he couldn't understand what he was saying. It's not like he was thinking about anything in the first place. He couldn't expect the listeners to understand if even he, the speaker himself, didn't. But unexpectedly, the elders were nodding just like him.

They behaved like they understood his words.

Suzuki Satoru, the salaryman, found their reaction very familiar. He had seen many situations just like this. No, he should say that he understood it because he himself did that all the time.

Ah, how should I put it? This is how superiors react when their subordinates use jargon or abbreviations they don't know of...

Silence permeated the area for a while after Ainz ended his greetings.

"...That's good to hear. Then let us take our leave as well. Long greetings to someone after a long journey would make one grow ivy after all"

"Ivy, is it?"

Ainz unintentionally repeated the word back. Maybe that was how Dark Elves say that it's not good to extend a conversation too long, but then it should have been translated as such to his ears. It sounded too literal to him.

They probably heard Ainz's unintended question, but despite that, the elders turned away and started walking back, ignoring him.

"...what?"

It didn't go according to his simulation.

Ainz looked at the gifts he had brought.

He originally expected that they would request the distribution of gifts to be left to them.

Eh? ...Only greetings? What does this mean? Did I make a mistake?

Ainz felt uneasy, like this was an interview that ended too quickly. This was exactly how one would react if the interviewer asked "are there any questions?" after just a few words.

If they had shown clear signs of dislike at Ainz's words from before, he would have chalked it up as valuable experience even if they end up having to move to another village.

However, he didn't get any reaction out of them at all at the end of their conversation, so he was not even sure if he had left a good impression or a bad one.

On observing the people around him, he couldn't feel any dislike or hostility directed at him. Rather, it looked like they too were puzzled by this development.

I don't understand at all...but, there's no use in thinking further. Depending on the situation, maybe I should use [*Perfect Unknowable*] *to snoop on them and what exactly they are thinking.*

Ainz stared after the retreating elders and then asked a nearby villager as if he

suddenly remembered something about a related matter.

"...Seems like I am welcomed at least. I have something to talk about with the elders, are they busy?"

"Eh? Aa, I...think?"

The villager replied with a vague answer in a fluster. He probably racked his brain for an answer from the previous conversation.

"There's a tree that's used by the elders for meetings, I will show it to you later."

The Master of the Hunt, who was closest to him, extended a lifeline. Ainz could understand why Aura called him uncle.

"Right, I will try to have a talk with them when there's time. —Now that's dealt with, let me go and join those two at the house. I hope someone can lead me to our lodgings."

"I will be happy to do it!!"

Ainz's non-existent heart jumped out at the sudden voice from his side.

It was Blueberry.

He had probably climbed down to the ground from the walkway silently while Ainz was talking with the Master of the Hunt.

"...Sudden shouting is bad for the heart, so could you please stop?"

"S-sorry...I will be careful so that something like this won't happen in the future."

Ainz couldn't admonish Blueberry more after seeing him this extremely apologetic.

He wanted to show that he was a tolerant person. He also didn't want to agitate the man further into doing unpredictable things.

"I am glad that you understood...Now then, I am probably troubling Blueberry-san, but can you please lead me there?"

"It's no trouble at all. If there's anything in this village that troubles you, please call me. I will try to help as much as possible."

"That's reassuring to hear," Ainz replied and started walking after Blueberry. However, that didn't mean his work was done yet. His most important task still remained.

Ainz stopped on the way, his eyes landing on a group of kids and–although it was hidden by the cloth—he smiled at them.

There were 4 boys and 2 girls, a total of 6 children.

Two kids, a boy and a girl, looked younger than the twins. One boy was of the

same age and the remaining three looked older.

"Yaah, you kids" Ainz greeted while walking toward them.

None of the adults around stopped him out of wariness. Ainz had probably left a good impression on them with his behavior since his arrival.

"I hope you will look after Aura and Mare."

"Eh?" said the children's faces. He couldn't stop here. He needed something to push them on. Frankly speaking, it was for this moment that Ainz even set out on this journey.

"Please let those two play along with you all. That said, you probably can't win against them if you play games that involve moving your body. So I would be grateful if you could invite them to play something different, the kind of games that they can't play in the city"

Ainz had simulated his conversation with the elders with Mare's help. In contrast, he had simulated this conversation with the children by conferencing with himself in his mind. There were probably going to be mistakes and some things he had forgotten about.

He couldn't be seen making mistakes by the adults as it could affect them adversely hereafter. That was why he wanted to talk with the children alone as much as possible, but it's doubtful if they would allow him, some unknown outsider, to interact with their precious children without an adult's supervision. He would have to use this chance now.

Ainz brought out a leather pouch from his pocket.

Then he took out an amber-colored lump half the size of his thumb from it.

"Now then, hold out your hand"

The one Ainz spoke to was a boy standing at the head of the group. He was probably the leader of this village's children.

Ainz dropped the lump in the boy's palm, taking care not to let their hands touch directly.

Though it looked like a bribe, it was certainly not one.

Ainz sincerely wanted to give it to him normally instead of dropping it from above, but his hand was an illusion. If they were to touch, he might find something wrong with the texture.

He absolutely had to avoid that.

Ummm. What if I cut some criminal's hand and make a glove with the muscle and skin? Maybe Nazarick has someone good at that task...I wonder if they would hate it if it was a human's hands though. But again, someone like Neuronist might like it...

"Eh, T-this is..."

Ainz spoke gently to the boy who was looking at the weirdly shaped thing in his palm.

"It's candy. It's sweeter than fruit. Ah, it's the type where you lick it, not the type you chew. But...I don't know if it's sweeter than the truly tasty fruits..."

Ainz stated with slight hesitation.

Due to his body, Ainz couldn't confirm the taste himself. At most, he could only check how it felt to chew, so he was not confident about their taste. He had certainly experienced licking candy in his previous world. But now, though the YGGDRASIL candy that he had never tasted before turned miraculously real, he could no longer taste them.

Taking into consideration that there were fruits with magical powers in this world, it was entirely possible that some could be sweeter than this candy. It was also possible that the Dark Elves were used to eating such fruit normally.

He had heard that the fruits of this world were not always easy to eat because selective breeding techniques did not progress much. That was why there were people inside Nazarick who were trying their hand at selective breeding.

For example, the Sous Chef.

The boy nervously put the candy into his mouth.

The kids around him—also Ainz and the adults watching them—waited for the unlucky (and also brave) boy's reaction.

"—Sweet!! Tasty! What the heck is this thing!!"

Ainz smiled at the boy's response, whose eyes were wide open with surprise. Ainz's expression remained the same even after seeing the boy, who from sheer surprise, took the candy out from his mouth, dripping with saliva.

I am relieved that he didn't dislike it...Allergy is the only other worry, but, well, that's not very likely...

"Come, come. Let me give you some too."

Ainz called them and gave out candy to each child.

There were also some gazes from the adults as if they wanted some, but he ignored them. This bribe was specifically for the children. There were no benefits in giving the adults some too. He was handing them out to the children because they were the ones he entrusted Aura and Mare with.

After everyone received some, Ainz repeated his request. Of course, he made sure that he didn't sound like he was threatening them.

"Well then, please take care of those two."

With his task done, Ainz started walking again. After realizing that no one stopped him—

Hell yeah!

—he let out a cheer internally.

The presentation went great, Ainz thought, but then he immediately abandoned the thought and became serious.

He would only know if he had succeeded or failed when those kids came to invite the twins to play. That said—

—I did what I set out to do. But…Why did Blueberry-san, who was walking in front me, not say anything? Parents should at least give a simple "thanks" if their kids were given candy, right? Does that mean his child was not among that group? Are there other children? Good grief. Seems like I have to work a little longer.

2

There were three people in the room.

The Grand Elder, Raspberry Nabar.

The Male Elder, Peach Orbea.

The Female Elder, Strawberry Pischa.

There was only one topic of discussion. Naturally, it was about the traveler who had just appeared a short while ago, the uncle of Aura—the ranger who possessed outstanding abilities.

And they were all at their wit's end.

The reason for that was—

"The Sawtooth Oak...what kind of tree is it? The fact that he used that name back there, what in the world could it possibly mean?

At the meeting they immediately held upon their return, Peach asked that question while he grimaced. Raspberry, with a similarly sour expression on his face, answered.

"No idea, but do you really think we could just ask him that right then and there?...If it meant the sacred tree that his tribe uses for ancestor worship or in rituals, wouldn't he think that he had been insulted if we said we didn't know what kind of tree it was?"

Heaving a sigh, Strawberry grumbled.

"This is all because we put on the demeanor of 'obviously we know that' back there. The words 'we don't know' would never escape our lips, no matter what was said."

"It would be one thing if we were different races, but we're all Dark Elves. Considering the direction they came from, it's very likely that they're from one of the clans that split off in our parents' generation. If that is the case, then the

differences in language shouldn't be that big. When you put all of those together, that was probably a formal greeting in the style of his tribe."

"I couldn't confirm it since you could only see the area around his eyes, but I caught sight of some features that looked as if he had some Elf blood in him. So, it might be possible that it was the etiquette for greetings that originated with the Elves?"

Beyond that, they also had another basis for his possible connection to the Elves. That was his name.

Dark Elf names went in the order of family name followed by given name, while Elves on the other hand, used the order of given name followed by family name. In light of that, how they were named was similar to the Elven style.

"Naturally, I wouldn't know about the Elven way of doing things nor their etiquette, now would I? Do you two know?"

There was no reply.

First off, it wasn't as if even they knew all of the Dark Elf traditions. That was because some of the oral traditions had been lost prior to them coming to this forest, so they were in a situation where they didn't even know what had been lost. That was why they were racking their brains over it.

"For the time being, are we all in agreement that our name was passed down in his tribe as the tribe of Ring-Cupped Oak? It's either that or something similar. For example, perhaps this Oak splits into two when it grows so we're being called that because we branched off his clan too?"

"If you consider the flow of that conversation, it seems like there is no other way we could interpret it. However, along with the Sawtooth Oak, I wonder what kind of tree a Ring-Cupped Oak is? I wonder if there was a hint that it could be another name for one of the trees we do know of? And on top of that, what significance does the choosing of that tree have?"

On the contrary, if they likened a tree that they knew to the Sawtooth or Ring-Cupped Oak trees, their visitors might question their sanity. Therefore, if they knew what trees they were, they could then grasp the nuances held within. However, even they, within the extent of their knowledge of trees and plants, could not stumble upon anything about the Sawtooth and—in particular—Ring-Cupped Oak trees.

Even when they went so far as to take into account that the common names of trees might differ by clan, no answer was forthcoming.

"Hmmmm. It would be great if we could hear it straight from the source, but..."

“If we could do that then we would…Wouldn’t it be troublesome if he thought we didn’t even know that much? It might leak out to the youngsters from him.”

Even they at least knew that the youngster’s group hated them. Nevertheless, they believed the youngsters would come to respect the wisdom they held when they were older. Traditions—ancient wisdom— seemed meaningless when one only took a glance at them. However, the truth was that there were some reasons as to why they persisted, and it wasn’t something that was okay to just disregard. Even they should agree that knowledge was power.

However, no one here even knew how to give a formal greeting—what would happen if the youngsters were to judge them for having lost that tradition? It might produce a more serious and lethal confrontation than there was right now.

That was why they were racking their brains over it.

“I wonder if it really was just a mere greeting…even when I looked him in the eyes he didn’t seem to be showing a hint of emotion. He was so expressionless that it felt a little unsettling.”

“…So…what do we do? His knowledge concerning Dark Elf traditions is something I’d like to ask him about though…”

“…That’s a little too dangerous. Even if we were to abide our shame and say to him that we wanted to talk with him privately, I don’t know if he would really keep his mouth shut. If that’s the case…you don’t jump into a briar patch if you’re not being chased, huh?

“You’re right. It’s best to keep a certain distance, and not approach him.”

“That being the case…what do we do with his gifts? The souvenirs from a land where races other than Elves or Dark Elves live. There are probably rare items among them.”

If the three elders took responsibility for distributing the souvenirs, there would be some suitable benefits to it.

Of course, there would probably be people who would make their discontent public depending on what was distributed and to whom. The drawback was the possibility of them bearing a grudge over it. However, in most cases, that sort of person would already have a reputation of saying that it was unfair no matter what they received. It was obvious that some of the youngsters would complain just because the elders were the ones who divvied everything up. However, if the elders distributed everything fairly, then everyone else aside from them would probably look coldly upon the ones who would say that it was unfair.

Therefore, even if the elders placed the duty of distribution upon themselves, they did not intend to take anything for themselves.

There should be more value in creating an image of them being selfless elders than there was in pocketing rare goods.

However—

"—As was just said a moment ago, don't jump into a briar patch. If we decide to distribute his gifts, the necessity of directly signaling our gratitude to him would emerge, whether we like it or not. If that were to happen, we would probably have to convey our gratitude in a form that followed the rules of proper etiquette after all."

"…That means in the event that the other party placed a lot of importance on etiquette, they might regard us as boorish or they might interpret it as us being dissatisfied with their gifts, correct?"

If he were to think that as the village elders they should know the proper etiquette, then how would he react if he was to see their ill-mannered attitude? When falling from a great height, the higher you were, the bigger the damage would be.

Moreover, when one received a magnificent gift from a visitor, one could not respond to it in the same way they would when they were to receive some trivial item. One would have to afford their benefactor every courtesy.

"Then let's leave it to the youngsters. It was fortunate that they got ahold of the gifts first. We'll probably hear all the details, so it's fine to just leave it to them as it is.

"That's right. That's a good idea."

While Raspberry and Strawberry were concluding things, Peach looked sullen.

"I don't mind that, but should we call out to the youngsters to be careful? That lot are the type to disregard the traditions, and so they might unwittingly insult his tribe."

"Hmmmm." The two other elders also looked sullen now.

"This isn't the time to be saying things like, 'are we at fault for not drilling it into them, even if we had to invoke our power as the Council of Elders, after all?' now is it? The uncle of Aura-dono, the one who easily repelled the 'Ursus Lord. I have no doubt that he is reasonably apt. I don't want to be glared at by a person like that."

"Be that as it may, do you really think those simpletons would honestly agree

with anything we had to say? For now, we'll just warn them, and if they were to make some blunder, the only thing that could be done then would be for us to…take the blame, wouldn't it? Frankly, I don't want to have anything to do with that, but even so, we are the elders, aren't we…"

"We have to take responsibility…huh. I guess that can't be helped…"

"However…what should we do? What was the reason that the uncle came to see the members of his own race, did anyone hear?

"…What should we do if the reason he came here was to learn the customs that are passed down in this village? …To put it bluntly, I wouldn't touch that with a ten-foot pole."

"It would be awkward if we didn't have the welcome party, right? When Fiora-dono came, she said her uncle was also coming, so we haven't done it yet. Plus, to the rangers who did that much work in just a few days, not holding the welcome party would be the village's shame…and finally, our lack of participation in that party would go beyond impoliteness, and would be the same as a provocation.

"…Haaa. We'll participate in the party, but let's try to keep our distance from him as much as possible. The uncle-dono looks young, I'm sure the youngsters will keep him company.

"That's right. I'm grateful to those children who will be making moves to win him over to their own side."

After that, when they had finished several other items on their agenda, Raspberry turned towards Peach and threw the question at him that he had been wanting to ask for quite a while.

"By the way, what did that whole thing with 'like allowing ivy to grow…' mean?"

Strawberry also looked at him. She probably also had that question in mind. They couldn't ask him right there, naturally, but now there was no problem.

Peach, who had been questioned, stammered in reply.

"…Sorry. I was trying to match the tone of the conversation…so I just…said…something that sounded appropriate."

"Haaa," Raspberry breathed a heavy sigh.

"…The uncle's bafflement at having never heard that expression before was apparent in his voice."

"What should we do about this… How do you think we should answer if he asks

about the meaning the next time we meet?"

"Even if you ask me that... If we were to be asked that question, we would have no other choice than to think of some suitable meaning for it right here, right now. We'll answer him with what we come up with. We can't say that we were just showing off appropriately... Moreover, it would be troublesome if the youngsters were to think that the traditions we regularly talk about were also something we say just to show off."

"Well, that might be the only thing we can do...Don't say things just to show off anymore, okay?"

"Yeah, I'm sorry. I won't do it ever again."

"Well then... What meaning would the words, 'like allowing ivy to grow,' have? Let's all decide on that so that we are all able to give the same answer to whoever asks, okay?"

The elders, who had thought they were done, once again started exchanging their opinions on the new agenda item that had appeared.

♦ ♦ ♦

It was around the same time, while the elders were at their wits' end trying to produce a tentative answer, that there were people who were similarly at their own wits' end.

It was the youngsters who opposed the elders.

The reason they—if you were forced to call them something, it would be the Youth Faction—were rebelling against the elders was because their very own principles opposed those of the elders.

Since they lived in the forest (a dangerous place) they held the opinion that for the sake of the village, they should yield to those who possessed superior abilities. Even if you were long-lived, you should give up your seat to someone else if you were inferior in ability to the younger generation.

It was the elders' respect for convention and tradition versus the Youth Faction's belief in ability supremacism, so to speak.

Therefore, if the elders were outstanding in terms of pure capabilities—in this case, that meant things that could be seen with the eye, like magic or fighting strength—the Youth Faction would probably also yield to them. Unfortunately, the elders didn't have that level of ability. From their point of view, people who

were finding one way or another to butt in were just irritating.

And yet, the reason this had not developed into a total conflict between them was because the four people in this village they deeply respected—the Master of the Hunt, Blueberry Egnia, the Chief Pharmacist, and the Rite Master—did not wish to oppose the elders.

However, something had shaken things up here.

It was the existence of Aura.

The magnificent and outstanding ranger. Even bearing in mind that she was a traveler, Aura's words carried serious weight among them. Her words were equal to, or above, those of the four people in the village who had gained their confidence up till now.

They couldn't help having Aura's opinion weigh on their minds.

Incidentally, those who had extreme views, even among the Youth Faction, were the Dark Elf zealots.

"So what do you think will happen?"

One of the youngsters asked everyone without moving his line of sight.

At the edge of his vision were the souvenirs that Aura's uncle had brought. Since no one had appeared who said that they would distribute them, they had been carried to the Elf Tree that was being used as the village's communal storehouse for now.

"Somebody'll probably distribute them, I suppose. The elders?"

If it were the usual pattern, that was how it would probably be. At times like this, the ones who would butt in would be the elders. Therefore, if things went the usual way, they would have commented that they would distribute it themselves first, but this time nobody said anything.

On the contrary—

"—I might not mind even if they did."

It was a set of circumstances where that opinion formed.

As expected, this was related to Aura, who they revered.

When Aura came, she hadn't shown them the etiquette passed down through her own tribe. Due to that, they got a sense that their ideology was being vindicated, that those sorts of things had been abandoned outside of the forest, or that capable people didn't worry about such things.

However, at the appearance of Aura's uncle—Ain Bell Fior— doubts about those ideas arose.

The greetings of the dark elf who was her uncle—who seemed to have a little

Elf blood mixed in him—were incomprehensible to them. Since he wouldn't have said something meaningless in a situation like this, there was no doubt that it was what the elders would call a greeting that obeyed proper etiquette.

The one who came first, Aura, hadn't displayed that sort of attitude. Yet, the one who came later, the uncle, respected such manners.

Where did this difference come from?

Although they wouldn't say it out loud, everyone had already deduced the answer.

It was the difference between children and adults.

He, the uncle, had made the request for the children to please look after the two of them. In other words, it meant that he was treating Aura, who possessed that much strength, as a mere child.

It was inconceivable.

Certainly, when living in the forest (a harsh place) the first important thing children should learn wasn't politeness. There were plenty of other things that were more important than that—it was necessary to drill into them the things related to survival.

Therefore, it was no wonder that the children would be totally unacquainted with the rules of etiquette, even the elders had never shown any signs of trying to relentlessly drill it into the children.

Based on that, what became a problem for them was why Aura's uncle hadn't shown a courteous attitude until the elders came.

Was it because Aura's uncle viewed everyone gathered at that place as children just like her? Not just the ones in the Youth Faction, no one there had shown the proper courtesy to the uncle. What sort of attitude would an adult take toward children who didn't know about that sort of etiquette?

Certainly, the adult wouldn't extend a greeting that followed the rules of etiquette. They would look at them in the same way they do children and treat them as such.

That etiquette stuff they had dismissed as meaningless until now suddenly had meaning. It was code used to show respect to the other party, and he had only shown it to the elders.

That was the answer they arrived at.

"If we're thought of as children with the appearance of adults by the uncle and then we just go ahead and divide up the souvenirs of our own accord, we might be regarded as a village where the children are in control—or worse—a village of

savages who don't even know what etiquette is."

"Even if we couldn't give a greeting that followed proper etiquette, he might not decide that we're children just because of that...but he might. In the event that happened, when he returns to the city, it would be spoken of all around that in a village of the Dark Elves who live in the forest, there's a group of childish people who like to throw their weight around, you know."

"...I resent that."

"Yeah, I feel the same way. This village being laughed at by the outside world is a little—no, pretty damn unpleasant."

"... The reason why he didn't greet us in a way that followed the rules of etiquette was probably to appraise our worth."

"Yeah, I think if we had responded with the proper etiquette, then Fior-dono's attitude would have been different."

There certainly was some feeling that they had been pigeonholed, but it might not have been done out of malice. Rather than that, what benefit would there be for the other party to be malicious and still make contact with them? Of course, it wasn't as if there was no possibility that he just had a rotten personality.

"...I can't really agree with it for one reason or another, but we have no choice but to leave it to the elders, who follow the rules of etiquette, after all."

Since he seemed to have greeted the elders in a way that conformed to proper etiquette, the elders must have also been courteous to him. In the present condition, the uncle could be considered to have paid respect to the elders but not to them. If the elders were to divide up the souvenirs, then the uncle wouldn't think of it as strange.

"Yeah, that's right. If we don't do anything then the elders will just divide everything up of their own accord. And then...the only other ones we can ask to do it are the Chief Pharmacist and the Rite Master, who weren't there...but what do you guys think?"

"Those two...especially the Chief Pharmacist, will absolutely hate it."

The Chief Pharmacist was the type who would find doing this kind of thing bothersome, and if they were turned down by the Rite Master, it would end up being left to the elders.

"...Alright. We've come to a conclusion. For the time being, we've finished the task we were asked to do. Let's get outta here."

"Yeah, let's do that. And then...should we learn the bare minimum of the rules

of etiquette from the elders?"

The youngsters all looked reluctant to do so.

It was because until now they had concluded that etiquette was pointless. They didn't want to be treated like children ever again.

That was why lowering their heads to the elders at his point was unpleasant.

The youngsters, who had mixed feelings, breathed heavy sighs from the bottom of their hearts.

"Also…there was talk of holding the welcome party after Fior-dono and the younger brother had come…what do we do? Surely there must also be a way to hold a party that conforms to etiquette. Failing to be polite would be an embarrassment, wouldn't it?"

"We'll probably be alright with the party…but the village being judged as just a collection of children who don't know what manners are is troublesome. Let's leave the arrangements for the party to the elders."

"That's fine. If it's the elders…though it annoys me to admit this, they'll probably get that part done right."

♦ ♦ ♦

While the elders and youngsters were each at their wits' end about what would happen hereafter, there was yet another group who were also at their wits' end.

It was the six children.

They had gathered around in a circle and among them, the one who was most at his wit's end was the first child to receive candy from Ainz—in other words, the child who had been asked to play with Aura directly.

It was the truth that the children had a strong curiosity about the girl who came from that unknown, distant place called the city.

Even now they were interested in, wanted to make friends with, and wanted to play with her. In spite of that, there was a reason why they just looked at her from a distance and never approached her.

It was because they were living in different worlds.

Even if the girl who had abilities that surpassed those of the number one hunter in the village was close to them in terms of age, the difference in their standing was on the order of that between heaven and earth. They couldn't just approach and start a conversation with that kind of person.

Even if you saw a super famous person that you yourself respected, it was normal to hesitate to even talk to them.

However, from this moment on, they had to do that.

"What're we gonna do? …What kinda games should we play with them? …What even is playing if a contest of athletic ability isn't on the table?… So basically it would mean things other than tree climbing, which uses your body, or something…? There's no playing like that…"

You could say that the reason the Dark Elf children were optimistic about inviting Aura to play with them was because of the candy they had received just a bit ago, but you could also say it was because they wanted to try playing with her even more than that too. In a sense, you could say that Ain's proposition had been a godsend for them.

"How about 'What's in the Leaves?'"

What's in the Leaves was what the other races would call Hide and Seek.

"I don't know about the boy who came today, but that girl is a super amazing ranger, you know? She'd find us all instantly. We couldn't do the same for her."

"Who cares if we get found? That's not what playing's all about, is it?"

"You moron. Getting her to play with us is different from playing together with us."

The other children who heard that whistled in admiration.

"You're so cool Ku-chan!"

"That's our Ku-chan!"

"Whoa! Don't say something so obvious!"

Ku-chan—Orange Kunas.

While the child who had received the candy from Ain had a conceited smile on his face, he calmed everyone down and got them back under control.

"Well, putting aside the fact that I am pretty cool, did you guys think of something to play that's not a con, a contest of athletic ability?"

"Tree cli…is a contest, isn't it."

Among the children who were hmmming deep in thought, one of the older girls asked.

"Well, if that's how it is, can't we just have them teach us the games they play in the city?"

"Haa." After Kunas had let out an exaggerated sigh, he answered her point blank.

“You moron.”

“What do you mean, ‘moron?’”

“—What, you mad? If you remember what he said, calling you a moron’d be appropriate. He said to let them play something that can’t be played in the city, something that can only be played in this village, didn’t he? Don’t tell me you forgot already?”

“...Did he say that?”

“Yes, he did. So something we can play that couldn’t be...played in the city, would be what, exactly? I mean just what the heck kinda games do they even play in the city? Should we start off by asking them about that?”

“Something unique to the village...going into the forest, then?”

“Knock it off!” Upon hearing one person’s suggestion, Kunas had a stern expression on his face. “It’s not as if you guys don’t know what happened to Arkun, right!?”

Everyone fell silent. Among them, the child who had made the proposal, had gone pale.

It was relatively safe inside the village, but the areas around it were different. If the children went into the forest to play by themselves, danger would descend upon them. Certainly, they might be okay if it were just once or twice. However, that luck wouldn’t hold out forever. Children who never come back existed, and the adults didn’t do anything about it.

They did not even do the simplest of things like keeping an eye on the gatherings of children, or tying a long string onto the children.

Even if there were those who never came back, it was regarded as a necessary sacrifice for violating the directions of the adults and exposing themselves to danger as a result.

If they could teach the other children about the dangerousness of the forest through the death of one child, it wouldn’t be thought of as a substantial loss.

On the contrary, the idea of them growing up without knowing the dangers of the forests was more frightening.

In fact, there wasn’t a single adult in this village who didn’t have a friend in their childhood who became a victim of the forest. For this reason, they were plenty afraid of the forest. Being vigilant, they were able to live out their lives in this village. This was what it meant to live in this forest.

“I know you’re thinking ‘that girl is a ranger with remarkable skills, so it’s safer

to go into the forest with her than with the adults.' But, it's too dangerous for us. Take Iris and—" Kunas pointed at the smallest boy. "—me, our physical strength and other stuff is totally different, right? At the very least, you have to be able to climb a tree immediately."

"So what do we do then?"

That was where they had ultimately ended up.

"So I guess we have to ask those two about what they do to have fun in the city."

"I mean, what kinda place is a city? Are there more trees than there are here, you think? Is it so full of wild game that the girl could become an amazing ranger?"

After the children exchanged glances, they naturally stared at Kunas.

With a look of triumph on his face, Kunas answered.

"I heard the whole story from the adults that went hunting with her."

"That's our Ku-chan. You're amazing!"

"You really are amazing, Ku-chan."

"Heh, Heh, Heh...It seems like a city is a place where it's not just Elves or Dark Elves, but also a lot of guys from various other races are there. It sounds like there aren't any trees at all. Instead, they say that a lot of houses are made of bricks, mortar, or some other kinda dirt there."

"From dirt... So it's something like the Garicus do?"

(T/N: The original is 茸蟻人(Furigana: ｸﾞﾘｴｲｸ), seems to be a reference to Termite Mushroom + "man" so garicus (agaricus) would be my guess for the intended name.)

The name of one of the races that live in this forest came up.

The Garici were also omnivorous, but since they didn't go so far as to eat intelligent life, even if they ran into a Dark Elf in the forest, they would both keep their distance and silently pass by each other. It seemed like their dwellings were shaped like boxes of hardened dirt.

The children imagined a meadow with a lot of those boxes, they tilted their heads in puzzlement because they simply couldn't understand it.

"Whoa. They came from a place that's kinda amazing..."

"I kinda feel like I want to hear more about the city..."

"Look. Even if we asked them about it, it could turn out to be something they've played even in the city, then the number of games we've prepared would just go down, wouldn't they? In other words, we'll have to prepare several games

to play, won't we?"

"Argh!"

Once again, the children pondered.

It really was difficult.

"Hold on, what about Playing House?"

The smallest girl murmured.

The three oldest boys looked a little reluctant.

As you would expect, they probably wanted to say that they had already outgrown that kind of game. However—only Kunas looked like he thought it might not be that bad of an idea.

"Certainly, if it was Playing House, it wouldn't be a contest of athletic ability or anything, would it? No, anything but that!"

"But it's not something that can only be played in the forest, is it? It's something you can do anywhere!"

"All we have to do is play a version of House that's unique to the village."

A version of House that was unique to the village…

What kind of House would it be? Excluding Kunas, the speaker, nobody gave an indication that they knew.

"Also, that boy who came later. He doesn't look like he's very good at physical activities, so Playing House might not be a bad idea. At that age they probably still play House, right?"

"I do not!"

One of the boys, who was around the same age as Aura, said. The children around him countered with, "wha?"

"You were Playing House by yourself."

"That wasn't Playing House! I was playing Dark Elf Heroes!"

The children's conversation shifted to a discussion of what the difference between Playing House and playing Dark Elf Heroes was.

♦ ♦ ♦

Accepting Blueberry's guidance, Ainz arrived at an Elf Tree. Of course, Ainz knew where Aura was staying. Therefore, being led here was unnecessary. But, seeing as today was supposed to be the first time Ainz had come here, he couldn't act as if he did.

Since he didn't see them outside, it seemed like they had gone inside the house first.

"Thank you very much for showing me the way here."

Was there something he was curious about? Blueberry, who was acting as if he was examining the Elf Tree, said in a disappointed-sounding voice.

"I am glad that it seems I was able to be of service to you. Should anything else arise, please do tell me. Shall I carry your luggage inside?"

"N-no, I would hate to have you go to all that trouble. Please pay it no mind."

"Is that so? You may ask anything of me, if you wish?"

Ainz didn't know why, but Blueberry was coming closer to him without any hesitation.

Humans had a concept called personal space. Maybe for Dark Elves, that personal space was closer than for ordinary humans?

When he thought about it, living in a dangerous place where monsters could appear in the surrounding areas like this village also meant that you had to cooperate with others to survive. Perhaps that was even being expressed in a situation like this. Be that as it may, there really wasn't a single thing he wanted to ask him to do.

"No, there really is nothing. Just guiding me all the way here was more than enough."

"Is that so…Well then, Fi…P-please give my regards to Aura-san."

…Why only Aura? …Ah! So that's what it is! Ainz had arrived at the answer. *…Crap. I forgot to introduce Mare, didn't I? Aura called out his name, but that was it.*

However, the merits of introducing Mare to the adults weren't that big. Since he just needed to have the children know who Mare was, he could just let Aura take care of that.

"Understood. I shall pass it along to her."

Seeing off Blueberry, who kept looking back at him, Ainz went inside the Elf Tree and, just as he had expected, the two of them were waiting for him there.

"Good wo…" Ainz suddenly hesitated and corrected his form of address. "No, I kept you guys waiting, didn't I?"

"I know this is abrupt, but what shall we be doing from here on—"

"–Wait. Let's quit it with the excessive honorifics. I understand very well that if we have Aura the ranger's ears, then no matter what Dark Elf in this village tried to creep up on us she wouldn't fail to hear their footsteps. In other words,

right now, this place is safe, which means there's no problem as to the kind of language we use. However, acting is something where if you're not always on point, the slightest thing could reveal the faults in your performance—While we are in this village, I am Aura's uncle. There's no need for you to use honorifics with me."

"Uu," Aura groaned. When she cast a quick glance at Mare, who was next to her, she dropped her gaze just a little bit. Then, while looking at Ainz with upturned eyes, she asked.

"Err, uncle. What're we gonna do now?"

Mare nodded his head in agreement beside her.

"Good. Attagirl...No, this way of speaking is also awkward for me as Aura's uncle. With the same kind of feeling as just a moment ago...that's fine, Aura. Something like this?"

(T/N: Ainz literally uses the word グッド (good) here)

Aura showed an expression that you could say was either, a forced smile, troubled, or even that she was embarrassed. Confirming that it wasn't an attitude of "no good"—even if she said it was no good, he had intended for them to take on a more affectionate attitude than usual—Ainz announced to the two of them.

"—Now then, no, maybe something like, let's see? For the time being, as we had planned at the start, our plan to stay in this village for a week at the longest, has not changed...hasn't changed, would that be better? Because we don't know how the situation might change—or is changing—I can't say anything with certainty, but I'm planning to take it easy and gather some information for now."

"Oh, uh, well, uncle. When you say information, what kind of information is it?"

"Good, Mare. That's got a nice ring to it!"

Ainz also had a feeling that this wasn't much different from Mare's normal way of talking, but for the time being, he would praise him. After glancing at Mare's bashful expression, he started his explanation. Mare had even asked him about it on the way here, but he said that he would explain everything once Aura was with them to buy himself some time.

Thanks to that, he had time to properly prepare an excuse for why they were staying here.

"It's everything! Everything about this Dark Elf village. Because hereafter, there may come a time when I'll have the two of you act like ordinary Dark Elves,

you know? No, that time may never come. However, if that time does come, you would be considered suspicious if you acted without knowing what the customs among the Dark Elves is. Therefore, we'll think about the future while we still can, so I have been thinking, what if we are able to experience the customs of the Dark Elves even just for a little bit in this village?"

Wasn't that a pretty good excuse? And the important part was about to come up.

"There may also come a time when I will need to have you two in particular act like ordinary Dark Elf children. So how about you two try playing with the other children? Of course! This isn't an order or anything like that. I don't mind if you go about it in a better, different way."

From the perspective of the plan to have the two of them make friends, these instructions were probably a little last minute. If he stepped into it a little more, it would have become an order, but if he didn't, there was a good chance that they wouldn't associate with the children.

However, the two of them having curious looks on their faces was something he had not foreseen.

What? Why? ...I thought it would be perfect because I refined my simulations of how they would respond over and over again. Did I leave something out?

"Are you sure it is alright...err...it's okay to not gather information on the Theocracy?"

This time it was Ainz who had a curious look on his face at Aura's question. Be that as it may, not even the slightest movement would show on an illusory face.

Why would they even be talking about information on the Theocracy? Mentally, Ainz was tilting his head in confusion.

It should have been the case that he had told them this was a paid vacation back in Nazarick. He had a memory of saying that this could simultaneously serve as a test of whether or not Nazarick could function without any problems even with three of its top brass—Ainz, Aura, and Mare—missing. However—

I never talked about getting information on the Theocracy, did I? Because unlike Albedo or Demiurge, their karma values aren't that low.

Let's just ignore what the two of them did in the Kingdom, for now.

On the whole, whatever feelings of kinship these two might have might only extend to the Elves and Dark Elves, or they might simply just hate humans.

"Ooh, that's right. If we can obtain information on the Theocracy as well, I'd

like you to do that too."

"Yes! Understood!—Huh? Yeah. Gotcha…?"

Smiling at Aura, who didn't appear used to speaking in this manner yet, Ainz loosened the strings on their luggage.

"Okay. We're living here for a week at most. Let's organize the merchandise."

Ainz's group had brought Dwarven-made tableware and various other things with them, they had become quite the burden. These were things that were meant to draw the Dark Elves' interest, same as those souvenirs from just a while ago. It was also for that reason that they had to be arranged in a way that would be overflowing with appeal and not just carelessly placed randomly.

In other words, they were making a showroom.

While Ainz, who had absolutely zero confidence in his aesthetic sense, was collaborating with the twins to decorate the Elf Tree, Aura stopped moving.

"Uncle. The sounds of six sets of footsteps are heading this way in a straight line. There's no indication that they're erasing their presence and they're approaching us. Judging from the lightness of the footsteps, they're children, I guess?"

Oh. Ainz also stopped decorating and turned his gaze toward the entrance. He truly hadn't imagined that they would come today. As Ainz was feeling thankful toward the children, the face of the boy he had given the candy to peeked through the entrance.

Ordinarily, you would call the act of peeking into other people's homes nothing else but rude, but it seemed to be normal in this village.

"Hi there, did you perhaps come to invite Aura and Mare to play, I wonder?"

"Yea, uh, yes. That's right."

Was he a little surprised by the appearance of the room? Ainz gave a broad smile to the boy who answered nervously.

"I see. I see. We've been waiting for you. Alright you two, go on and play with the other children."

"Eh? Uh, umm, un-uncle. It's just, you know. The room's not cleaned up yet…"

"Oh, that's alright, Mare. Your uncle will take care of the rest. Just leave it all to me! Uh-oh, your uncle doesn't have much confidence in his aesthetic sense though. If you say later that it should be arranged another way, we'll go with that! Ha-ha-ha."

Aura and Mare looked shocked at the laughing Ainz.

Certainly, if it had been the usual Ainz, he wouldn't have laughed with a "ha-ha-ha" or even at all, so it wasn't as if he didn't understand their feelings. Although he thought his persona as an uncle was a little unnatural, if he were questioned about it later, he would insist he was just acting.

"—If that is what uncle says… I got it! I'm coming, just gimme a sec. Well then, let's go Mare."

"Y- yeah."

The twins went out, and a smile of satisfaction that came from the bottom of his heart showed on Ainz's face.

This makes me want to give even more candy to the children who came to invite Aura and Mare to play with them as a token of my gratitude! No, wait a minute…? How would those two react if they found out the children had come to invite them out of their desire for candy? They might be shocked.

Honestly, he didn't think those two were that delicate, but—

It's because I'm not Chagama-san. It's not as if I know everything about those two. That being the case, I should probably act based on the assumption they will be shocked, after all. If this became some kind of trauma and they said they couldn't make any friends, I would never be able to face Chagama-san. That said, I wonder what kind of game they're going to play?

Ainz narrowed his eyes and yearned for the old days.

Suzuki Satoru's glory days. He remembered the figures of those forty people—and one more person—who gathered together in a game called YGGDRASIL.

The friends gathered together there—each lived in their own different worlds.

Those who lived in Mega Corp arcologies, those who lived in the inferior Dome Cities, those like Satoru who lived in a harsh environment, and those who endured even more deteriorated environments.

The same game united those total strangers that would have had no contact with one another otherwise.

"…Games can overcome borders. It does overcome borders. No, I wonder if it's correct to say that only through games can one overcome them? And finally…you can become friends even if you live in different worlds, just like I…just like we did…"

The overwhelmingly powerful Guardians and the frail children. When they leave his place their connection would probably also be lost. And yet—

"—I would be overjoyed if they learned that the existence of friends was this

wonderful thing."

It was only natural, but the figures of those two weren't at the end of his line of sight.

And yet, it was as if he could see the figures of the twins.

If they played with the children and found out they couldn't get along, then it couldn't be helped.

It was the same for Ainz too. He didn't know exactly how many Players he had interacted with in YGGDRASIL, but it was probably a considerable amount. And yet, there existed only forty-one people who he could call friends.

It wasn't as if he could build a friendship with every person he encountered.

All the two of them needed was the chance to meet a person they thought they could be friends with. If they learned that making friends wasn't so bad after all, then he would consider everything that happened here to be a success.

Ainz dropped his gaze toward the ring finger of his right hand, where he wore no ring, and smiled just a bit—

I've also thought about this before, but shouldn't I be striving so that Demiurge, Albedo, or even Shalltear could make friends? ...Well, maybe not.

He decided not to think about that matter too much, because just thinking about it a little bit had ruined his good mood.

At any rate, why hasn't anybody come by to see me? From what I picked up when I was eavesdropping with [*Perfect Unknowable*]*, they should be holding the welcome party any time now, right? Are they coming to get me when it's time? Don't tell me they're planning to make it a surprise?*

He also had his own circumstances, so being suddenly invited would be troublesome.

Above all was the fact that Ainz couldn't eat food. He didn't know what kind of party they were holding, but if it was the usual, then even among a gathering of powerful and influential people of the village, food would also be laid out in front of him. In a situation where he absolutely could not touch that food, how would the other parties react?

There was no doubt they wouldn't think well of him.

If they were totally different races, they would probably think that this kind of thing was normal and a host who provided food that wasn't palatable to their guest should be reproached. However, Ainz had transformed into a Dark Elf with illusion magic. So while there might be some foods that he could say he couldn't eat due to allergies, he couldn't just say he couldn't eat any of the food. That

would be impossible to gloss over with his usual excuses.

For this reason, it was necessary for him to take the initiative and prepare a reason ahead of time.

Or are they being thoughtful, thinking that I'm probably tired, so they don't intend to come and get me right away? In that case, I wouldn't mind if they postponed the party itself, but it would still be a problem even if they came to get me after they've finished the preparations...Should I go see them? Ainz pondered for a bit, then shook his head from side to side. *No, let's give up on that idea. Then...if somebody does come, should I ask that Dark Elf if they would deliver a message for me?*

Ainz recalled the sights he had seen when he was lurking in the village in his [Perfect Unknowable] state.

Morning and evening meals were usually brought together, but time-wise it should be any time now, right? Then how about I try asking the person who will bring the food? Or maybe regardless of whether I'm a traveler or not, food is distributed based on one's contribution to the village? If that's the case, then they won't bring food to us, who don't work? No, that shouldn't be the case, Aura has been working hard and I brought many souvenirs. They'll probably feed us for a week even if we don't work.

Of course, even Ainz had no intention of not working. He had called himself an arcane-type magic caster. If it were limited up to the Fourth Tier, he even intended to use magic should a time come when it was necessary. He was even ready to go hunting in place of Aura.

Since he didn't know how their relationship would progress from now on, he had no intention of accepting any charity.

It might still be just a little early time-wise. If they come, I'll just tell them. If they don't come, then I can just go to them. Moreover...there's also information I want to go and get.

♦ ♦ ♦

After she had been sent out by her master, Aura had been at her wit's end the whole time.

Her master's proposal was to "play with the children in order to learn the Dark Elves' customs." However, doubts about that proposal had emerged in her mind.

It wasn't as if children didn't know what the customs were, or that they were a people that lacked customs, she had a feeling that it would be absurd to think

that she could grasp the customs of the Dark Elves from the things she could learn from the children. Wouldn't the things she learned from the adults be the customs of the Dark Elves living in this Sea of Trees? She felt that it was dangerous to learn from children, even though they didn't know what the correct customs were for a proper comparison.

Harboring a misguided view of customs might itself be typical for children, but I wonder if that was the objective I was sent out for? In that sense, it would be more child-like.

She might just be overthinking it. However, "always use your head," the words she had been told by Albedo prior to their departure, flashed into her head.

Right now, she and Mare were the only ones serving their master. Since that was the case, as a representative of the Guardians she should show no shame and use her head to think about all kinds of things.

She grasped her Golden Acorn Necklace, invoked its power, and addressed Mare. She then received an immediate response.

「—Yeah. I think so too.」

Mare, who answered, wasn't grasping his necklace. That was because when the sender invoked it first—the activation of the item— it was a necessary action, but it wasn't necessary for the receiver to do so, even to continue the conversation.

「 If that's how it is then…there's probably some objective beyond us just playing together to learn their customs after all? Just what on earth do you think it could be? Since Ainz-sama said the word "friendly," when he came to this village, could it be a part of that? Because us playing with the children will become our appeal to the idea that we're friendly? 」

「That might also be part of it, but…hmmm… Oh, maybe we're going to take in the children?」

「What? If that's what it is, wouldn't it be better to win over the adults? I thought they were just a nuisance, but there were guys who looked like they could easily be won over.」

They were starting to understand the meaning behind them playing with the children less and less.

「If that's the case, I wonder then if Ainz-sama is thinking about using the children to do something? 」

Aura said to Mare as she stared at the backs of the six children walking in front

of them.

They were weak, fragile beings, and they weren't of high social status either. It was a mystery where their utility value lie.

「What kind of use do they have? Hostages?」

「I can't completely deny that possibility, but I don't really think that's it.」

「Children... Children... Using children to gather information?」

「Hmmm, but I wonder just what information would children know?」

「That's right, isn't it...」

It was a little difficult to imagine that information only the children held would be important. Or could it be that he also wanted the children's information because it had already been analyzed from multiple angles?

「I mean, c'mon, isn't all you've been doing is just shooting down of all my ideas? Don't you have any guesses that would make you go 'this is it!' or something? 」

「Hmmm...」 After a short time had passed, Mare's voice once again echoed in her head. 「Oh! Could he be thinking of taking these children to E-Rantel?」

「I see... That might be it, but if that's the case wouldn't it be better to take the adults after all?」

「Children who don't really know much about things are easier to win over, or something... Hmmm. Maybe he's thinking of taking not just the children, but everyone in the village?」

「Oooh, is that it? ...But you know, if the target is the all Dark Elves in the village, I don't think he would tell us to play with the children to get closer to them.」

If it were just as Mare had said, they would be working to win over the adults too. It might be different if the opinions of the children carried a lot of weight, but in the three days that Aura had stayed in the village, she hadn't caught sight of any indication of that at all.

However much she thought about it, she couldn't believe that the children had any special value.

「Then, I wonder if it really is just to cultivate friendly relations and gather information from the children after all?」

「I guess that's all it is... But when you think about it, it certainly might be just that. I mean, it's frustrating, but nothing else comes to mind except that...Well,

adults might be tight-lipped, but because they're children, they would just let information slip out. Yeah! If I was Ainz-sama, who really valued information, that would be an idea I would have! Then we have to bring up all sorts of subjects don't we?」

「Do your best sis.」

「Good luck to you, too. If it's just the two of us, we can speak normally, so we have to practice, you know.」

「That's only because we're using the necklace…」

The children walking in front of them stopped.

In a corner of the village, there was no playground equipment to be found, nor did it appear that there was anything in particular there at all. Of course, Aura knew that sort of equipment wasn't anywhere in the village from her usual walks around it.

No, Aura recognized that her own ideas were wrong.

It was entirely possible that one of the children here could use magic to produce playground equipment.

In her sensory range as a ranger, she detected that an adult was watching them—one person.

「Oh, it's that guy. He's watching me again.」

「Who is he?」

「Don't look at him. The best ranger in this village is at our 10 o'clock. That guy, ever since I came to this village, he'd be looking at me sometimes, right? But he wouldn't come near me.」

「Like maybe they're feeling suspicious, but because they don't have any concrete evidence, they're keeping you under surveillance. Something like that?」

「Something like that. Be careful not to do anything that would make them suspicious of you too, Mare. We have to inform Ainz-sama about this later.」

Aura tried to ignore the man.

He probably thought that an excellent ranger like himself wouldn't be noticed, or maybe his objective was to let himself be noticed—perhaps he intended to silently keep them in check by letting them know that "I'm keeping my eye on you."

It was annoying, but she couldn't kill him. If she were to kill him, it would be with the permission of her master, and she would have to create a set of

circumstances where it looked like he had been killed by the Ankyloursus or some other magical beast. She would then have to come up with a simple alibi.

Well, it could be easily done if you were Aura the Beast Tamer.

"...So what are we doing in a place like this?"

"Okay! Let's Play House!"

The biggest boy said in a loud voice. It was like he was trying to get them to agree through the sheer energy with which he said it.

—Play House?

Of course, Aura knew what kind of game that was.

It's a type of role-playing, right? If I remember correctly... Bukubukuchagama-sama regretted it when Peroroncino-sama said that, "I want to be the baby and have mommy rub my head and tell me everything's going to be okay."...Is that what we're going to do?

Aura pictured herself rubbing Shalltear's head and saying "there, there. You'll be okay."

Ah, so something like that...But will I be doing that, or will I be the one it's being done to?...

It would still be fine if she had to take on the mommy role, but having the role of the baby was embarrassing. Or rather than it being just some role-play, wouldn't it be an insult to Bukubukuchagama-sama if she, who had been created as a Floor Guardian by the Supreme Beings, were to play the role of a baby?

Though Yamaiko-sama and Ankoro Mocchi Mochi-sama did laugh when they heard about Peroroncino-sama's actions...Bukubukuchagama-sama might get angry with me...

It was simple enough to say she didn't want to play that game. However, in order to gather information and to also loosen their lips, it might be necessary for her to agree to it. Everyone was the same in this regard. Say there was someone who accepted your proposal versus someone who rejected it.Who would you like better? Plus, those who played the same games together could usually become friends.

On the other hand, what would happen if she said she didn't want to play that game?

If that were the case, Aura didn't have the confidence that she could make a good suggestion if she were asked what game they were going to play then.

Aura could suggest a few games to play. For example, foot races, tree climbing, "sword fighting", and so on. However, those kinds of games were clearly decided

by differences in how good you were at playing them and more. Also, there shouldn't be any child who could stand shoulder to shoulder with Aura and Mare—especially Mare—in terms of pure physical abilities.

If that were the case, they would be boring games that had a foregone conclusion. In order to cheer them up, they could just let themselves barely lose. But, it was common knowledge that Aura was supposed to have—had driven away the Ankyloursus Lord. If a person as strong as that started saying, "oh no, I lost!" in a foot race or something, then even a child should realize that she was losing just to butter them up. If their relationship could be deepened though something like that, then those children would have to be people of great character.

So, if you were to ask her if there was an option of not playing, that would be impossible.

Because her absolute master had told her to "go play."

If that were the case—

"Si-sis… c-could it be…"

Mare had a startled expression on his face. He probably remembered the same things as she did, and arrived at the same conclusion.

Aura used all the strength in her body to give the frightened Mare her best smile.

"So this really has been an 'extremely high-level mission,' Mare!"

3

Having sent out Aura and Mare to play and after he had finished putting their things away, Ainz leaned against the wall, idly looking up at the ceiling while occasionally glancing at the small memo pad in his hand.

He had nothing to do.

Since they didn't have that much luggage to begin with, it didn't take long to tidy up everything. He just had to consult with those two on how to coordinate the interior when they got back.

He had thought that someone would come to see him right away but, all things considered, no one had come yet.

Ainz dropped his gaze to the memo pad in his hand.

What was written on it were the possible situations that could occur after they had come to the village and how to deal with them. However, no one coming to see him was not something that he could have ever imagined happening.

He had to acknowledge that holes had suddenly appeared in the scenarios he had thought up.

It wasn't a shock to him, because he was just an ordinary person after all, so he thought that was just the extent of his ability to plan ahead. What was important was how he was going to recover from this.

There were two main paths that he immediately thought of. One was to be calm and composed while staying in place, the other one was to take action of his own accord.

Ainz chose the former. He chose the path where he could avoid passing them by mistake.

For a short while, Ainz didn't do anything at all. Around the time he started worriedly thinking that maybe he had chosen the wrong path after all, a single

dark elf woman finally came and rudely peeked her head into the room from the entrance. People in this village were usually close enough to do this. When she finally made eye contact with Ainz, she acted a little surprised.

Ainz felt a little uncomfortable there.

Would Ainz's presence there really be that surprising?

No, is this sort of reaction appropriate if you were to look into a person's house—though we're just borrowing it—and make eye contact with the person inside? Though considering the sense of distance in the interpersonal relationships of Dark Elves, I have a hunch this is a little different...

As if she were greeting Ainz, the woman bowed her head once, turned her gaze to the floor, entered the room, and placed the dish she had brought with her on the floor.

The Dark Elves wore shoes even when inside the Elf Trees, because of that, he had some personal reservations about the tray of food being placed on the floor. That said, given that the Dark Elves sat on the floor when they ate—as far as Ainz had seen, less than half of the people here used a table—this might have been the natural thing to do.

And there was a point he was more concerned with than that.

The distance between them wasn't that great. If she had intended to hand it to him, it could have been accomplished by walking a few steps forward. In spite of that, she just silently placed the dish on the floor. Furthermore, since she first peeked her head in, they hadn't made eye contact once.

Even Ainz understood why.

She had no intention of talking to him.

However—hostility, contempt, hatred—he couldn't feel any sort of negative emotions coming from her. Even when she set down the dish, she had a polite demeanor. It was more reasonable to think that she was just that type of woman (the type that wasn't good at talking with people).

No, aside from that, I should consider the possibility of her being on guard. An adult with the same level of power as Aura's has come to the village. Seeing that she doesn't know what my background is, it would be natural for her to be on guard, especially around the opposite sex. However, the reason why I brought souvenirs and have been acting this way was so I wouldn't be thought of like that...this is bad...I'm a little stumped about how to deal with this.

He didn't know whether she had any children or not, but it would be troublesome if the women of this village—especially the mothers—started

saying things like, “don’t hang around those twins,” to their own children.

There would be children who would ignore what their parents said, but there would also be kids who would listen to them.

Ainz, brooding, gave up on immediately finding an answer to this problem.

Ultimately, if I don’t know this woman’s normal disposition then no matter how many assumptions I make about what sentiments or bearing behind her actions was supposed to convey, I would never arrive at an answer.

She set down the dish she was carrying, bowed, and left the Elf Tree. Of course, Ainz also lowered his head with the same timing.

“Phew,” staring at the space where no one was, Ainz let out a sigh.

He didn’t ask her.

He couldn’t directly ask her what was with that attitude. Be that as it may, even if he hadn’t asked that sort of question, there were things besides that that he wanted to ask and talk to her about. However, how should he put it, because he had felt that there was a clear wall between them, he hesitated.

It wouldn’t be so bad to have the expectation that, while she might have had that kind of attitude, the next person he met might display a far more different attitude.

There was no doubt in his mind that that would provide better results than forcing a conversation on a person who had put up a wall around themselves.

That was what Ainz thought, but looking at the dish of food the dark elf woman had set down, he remembered his time as Suzuki Satoru.

—No! If it’s right now, then it’s not too late! Rather than letting this fester into a problem later, I should take care of it right now.

It was the same way in a company.

Rather than having a mistake be discovered later, the damage would be minimized if the mistake was immediately reported to one’s boss. Because even if you yourself thought it was a big mistake, there were times when it would turn out not to be that big of a mistake after all. However, the damage could become much worse the more time were to pass.

That’s right. There were a few things he should talk to the Dark Elves about sooner than later.

Ainz frantically rushed out of the Elf Tree.

He caught sight of the back of the dark elf woman right away. Since the Dark Elves—and Elves too for that matter—had a far better sense of hearing than humans did, she probably heard the sound of Ainz rushing out of the Elf Tree as

She was already turning around.

Was it because of his timing in calling out to her? She was quite surprised, that fact betrayed by her voice.

“So, about the welcome party—”

“—Please talk to the elders about that,” she answered, speaking rather quickly to cover it up.

It was an attitude that made you suspect that she was hiding something, something that she didn’t want to say. The first thought that suddenly popped into his head was—it was supposed to be a surprise.

Or rather, that was the only thing that occurred to him.

Of course, a surprise welcome party seemed a little strange, but it might have been a Dark Elf custom, so he should make it a special point to ignore it.

“Is that so... I do not know what you call it in this village, but right now I am in Kayoukazen of the Mourning Moon.”

“The Kayoukazen of the Mourning Moon is it?...”

“Yes, do you know of it?”

Of course, it was a ritual and name he had made up. His expectation that she couldn’t have known about it was betrayed by the following words.

“Oh, ah, no, that’s right...That, somewhere, right! I have a feeling that I might have heard that word somewhere else before...or maybe I haven’t.”

“Wha?” Ainz panicked. Could there have possibly been some similar word in this village? It would be bad if that were the case. The worst-case scenario would be if it was the name of some evil ritual. He didn’t know how to gloss it over.

However, since the words “Mourning Moon” by themselves also held the meaning of the month of the date of a loved one’s death, that meaning should have been transmitted to her. Even if the word “Kayoukazen,” a word coined by Ainz, resembled something in the Dark Elf vernacular, he should still have any number of excuses he could use.

Incidentally, the reason Ainz knew the words “Mourning Moon” wasn’t because he learned them at the company he worked for, but because it was the name of a Skill in YGGDRASIL. Wondering what it meant, he had looked it up.

“Wa- was that right? N- no, that’s right, isn’t it? We’re all Dark Elves, aren’t we? By some chance we might have the same sort of words, right? Although you won’t know if the meanings are the same unless you try asking.”

“Th- that certainly is right, isn’t it? And besides that! Though I might seem to recall that I’ve heard it before, I cannot say for certain that they are the same

‘Kayoukazen.’”

While Ainz and the woman were both speaking back and forth quickly, they each showed a smile like their faces were being pulled taut. Of course, since Ainz’s face was an illusion, his expression hardly shifted at all.

“Since this month is the time for me to pray for the tranquility of the dead, I would like to avoid going to places that are too cheerful, like a party, for the time being. Of course, because I imagine that this village has rules of its own, if you absolutely insist, I will participate. However, I would like for you to disregard any food and drink for myself.”

“Yes, it is the month you pray for the tranquility of the dead, isn’t it? So you are not eating or drinking. I understand.”

While thinking “yes, she got it!” he shook his head up and down.

“I would like to talk about this with the elders, but would you mind telling me which way I should go?

“I-if that is the case, then I will relay it to the elders!”

“Wha? That’s so...thank you very much! Well then, thank you for being so understanding!!”

Ainz didn’t say things like, “when we were talking earlier, it felt like you were telling me to go tell them myself,” he didn’t check with her either because her proposal was convenient for him. He was just going to take her word for it.

All that was left was for him to get the hell out of there before she said she had changed her mind or that she wasn’t going to do it after all.

Ainz abruptly announced his farewell to the woman, who was flustered by Ainz’s sudden and forceful urging, then he walked back to the Elf Tree.

While feeling relieved that she hadn’t called out for him to stop—he had ignored her as hard as he could—Ainz returned to their loaned dwelling and picked up the tray she had placed on the floor.

It weighed quite a bit, though from Ainz’s perspective it was still pretty light. It didn’t look like an amount of food the three of them could finish eating.

This was, without a doubt, the morning and evening meals—two meals for three people, a total of six servings. When he considered that, it seemed natural for there to be this much, but he also had a hunch that this was still a little too much. That said, this was because Suzuki Satoru had never put that much effort into his meals. In addition, ever since he became Ainz he’s had a body that couldn’t eat. So this might just be a lot of food based on his intuition.

Maybe you have to take in a lot of calories when you’re living in a place like this.

There's no such thing as a totally nutritionally balanced diet anyway.

Their meal consisted of cooked meat—which appeared to have been only roasted <grilled?>—and dried fruit. It was garnished with what looked like a salad of some kind of chopped leaves. In the salad, there were what appeared to be crushed caterpillars and a variety of tree nuts to go along with it. Incidentally, there was also a dish of assorted roasted caterpillars—big ones—and other bugs.

Aura's assessment of those was, "it wasn't very good." Moreover, due to the lack of variation in the flavors and ingredients, it seemed like one would quickly get tired of it.

Be that as it may, it had sparked his curiosity.

What sort of flavors would spread out in his mouth?

Since insects were packed with protein, Suzuki Satoru used to eat the barbeque-flavored ones often. However, he had never eaten these kinds of fat, whole-roasted caterpillars before.

While thinking it was a little unfortunate that his body couldn't eat, Ainz placed the dish on a shelf in the room downstairs. Finally, he started to think about what he should do from here.

Since the Dark Elves don't have the concept of lunch, the children's playtime should go on for a while—probably.

If the children were counted as part of the workforce, their play time might be controlled to a certain degree, but there were many people who knew Ainz had thrown a word or two at the children about his wish for them to play with the twins. Given that was the case, the adults would probably allow the children to play full-time, at least for today.

In other words, there was a good chance that neither Aura nor Mare would return any time soon. In that case, Ainz decided that he would use the time to pursue his own interests.

Even if he had used [Perfect Unknowable] and walked—well, flown—around the village, he had never shown himself in public and strolled around before. He might even discover something new. The last reason was that there were some places that he thought he would like to visit.

And I've made some preparations, just in case.

Unlike the memo pad he had been looking at just a while ago, this time he produced a proper notebook out of thin air—from his Item Inventory—and made it a point to try and memorize the various things he had written in it.

What had been recorded in it was the production method of a potion that used

various medicinal herbs and minerals.

Unfortunately, with Ainz's brain, he could only remember two or three kinds of concoctions at best. However, while Ainz's brain certainly wasn't anything outstanding, you couldn't say it was the cause of all of his problems. It was because the mixing process was fairly detailed—though that would obviously be the case—and it was also rather difficult to memorize them for a person who completely lacked basic knowledge of, and interest in, the production of the aforementioned concoctions.

While Ainz mumbled and recited the mixing process over and over again, he stowed away the notebook in his inventory, went outside a second time, and started walking around town.

A number of Dark Elves recognized Ainz and glanced his way. It wasn't as if he was being watched, what resided in the glances of the people who normally walked around the village were curiosity and interest.

While it would be dangerous if one person could see through his illusion, there was fortunately no sign that a person who possessed such an ability was present in this village. No, if there had been, then there would have been a huge uproar when they arrived at the village.

Though there were villagers who were curious and showed interest, no one came up to talk to him.

In this kind of isolated village, they would probably keep their distance from outsiders, as one would expect. No, even Ainz—no, even Suzuki Satoru—wouldn't try to approach and talk to some unfamiliar face just because they were in the company offices. On the contrary, if anyone did approach and talk to him, it might be logical to think they suspected him of something.

In the first place, Ainz didn't feel he was being alienated.

The twins were the main characters this time, right now Ainz was just an insignificant side character in this play. The problem lied in over-emphasizing that sort of minor role. Yet, the need to call attention to his presence, to a certain degree, would probably appear before long. He intended on that course of action anyways, in order to diminish Aura's role of a hero down to a mere child when the time was appropriate.

A dark elf in front of him walked toward him.

They would occasionally turn their gaze towards Ainz, but that was nothing more than the gaze you would turn to a person you were crossing paths with.

Perfect. Let's use that as part of my disguise.

Through his use of [Perfect Unknowable], he knew the general layout of the village, but they had established that this was the first time Aura's uncle had come here. He would probably appear suspicious if he were to walk around like he was too familiar with the place. Of course, he could make any number of excuses in that case. For example, Aura had told him, and so on. However, intentionally making excuses and appearing suspicious to them, were both troublesome acts.

He wouldn't do a single thing that would raise their wariness of him, and if that were the case—

"Ah, excuse me."

"Oh, yes. Can I help you with something?"

He just had to ask one of the Dark Elves that were around there.

"Yes. I heard about it from my niece, but as I understand it, there is a brilliant pharmacist who is the Chief Pharmacist of this village, yes? I would like to pay him a visit, so could you point me in the direction of his Elf Tree?"

They answered Ainz's question honestly, without any suspicion or concealment.

Ainz thanked the dark elf and headed in the direction they had told him—to the Elf Tree that Ainz already knew about.

Along the way, he saw the sight of a dark elf man with his hands sticking out towards the ground underneath a tree.

Wondering what he was doing, Ainz stopped. As he watched, the earth bulged, started moving, and a lump of soil climbed up the trunk as if it were a Slime.

It resembled the [Earth Surge] spell that Mare used, but it was different in various senses of the word.

Whether it be Domestic Magic or the Divine-type magic of the druids, it wasn't the magic of YGGDRASIL, but probably something they had developed over the course of their lives.

The lump of dirt conformed to the man's manipulation without delay and climbed to the top of the tree, which Ainz couldn't see from where he stood.

That was probably the soil the Dark Elves used in their household vegetable gardens.

The Dark Elves had vegetable gardens using planters that they built either inside or on top of the trees. Even though the planters themselves were made from the trees, he had wondered how they had transported the soil up to them, this seemed to be the answer to that.

Ainz was satisfied that he was able to see something interesting, and once again made his way towards his destination.

The Elf Tree he was directed toward was a rather imposing—and thick—one. It might possibly be the thickest in the village. As expected of the home of the Chief Pharmacist, an influential man in the village.

And on top of that, there was quite a distance between it and the other Elf Trees around it.

This was probably done so there wouldn't be any harm caused to those around it even if toxic substances were produced during the mixing process.

Even if they were a high level—with consequently enhanced immune systems—pharmacists who could withstand the poisons that were produced, it wasn't necessarily the case that children, the sick, or other sorts of people without that kind of resilience would be able to withstand it.

And maybe in addition to that—

It might also be to prevent the theft of information.

From Ainz's perspective, he truly could empathize with the idea of monopolizing information. Both in the sense of protecting one's vested interests and in the sense of wanting to avoid the trouble it would cause if they were stolen.

Everyone knew that a medicine could become a poison if you misjudged the dosage.

So, would the person who willfully stole that information be able to make proper medicine? Probably not. If an inferior imitation appeared on the market and victims of it emerged, then even the pharmacist who originally created the medicine would be suspected.

In short, that's what this was.

"—Hello, do you mind if I come in?"

Ainz called out into the interior of the Elf Tree.

There was no reply.

Knocking on the trunk of the Elf Tree, he called out one more time.

When he strained his ears, he could hear the sound of something being rubbed and scraped together.

"If you'll pardon the intrusion."

Ainz just walked in of his own accord. Then, he immediately caught sight of the back of a slightly plump male Dark Elf. Although it could be due to a lack of exercise, this sort of physique was probably the result of having food delivered

that was commensurate with having a prominent, high-status job. First of all, it was probably safe to assume that this wasn't an apprentice, but was indeed the master of this house—the Chief Pharmacist.

Sitting on the floor and turned towards a low-sitting desk, the pharmacist single-mindedly rotated his arm.

On the desk were an ordinary mortar and pestle, a Yagen mortar and pestle, and other rudimentary tools. The pots on the shelves probably had herbal medicines inside them. Herbs and plants that appeared to be medicinal hung down from the ceiling.

(T/N: Yagen (薬研) is a type of mortar and pestle that is used to crush ingredients for herbal medicine in Japan. Picture a boat-shaped bowl for the mortar and imagine the pestle is a wheel with a rod in the middle.)

The odor of bitter medicines and green grass mixed together and flooded into Ainz's nasal cavity, reminding him of Nfirea and his grandmother's workshop.

The Dark Elves possessed a far greater sense of hearing than humans did. Be that as it may, it would only be slightly better compared to humans, so Ainz had no way of distinguishing whether the Chief Pharmacist had noticed but dared to ignore him, or whether he hadn't noticed him because he was so focused on his work.

Ainz called out to him once more.

"Excuse me. Do you have a moment?"

There the Chief Pharmacist stopped his hand that was grinding for the first time and looked over his shoulder, sending Ainz a reproachful look and knitting his eyebrows.

"You—ah, I see. That face concealing cloth. If I'm not mistaken, you're that man from the same place as that girl who came here a little while ago. An Arcane-type magic caster was it?

"Yes, that's right. It seems that you are already well-informed about me."

When Ainz tried to remove the cloth, the Chief Pharmacist spoke.

"—That won't be necessary. It is the custom of your tribe, right? There's no need to show me your face. It's not like I care about what you look like anyway. You're fine as you are now. I accept your greeting. —Okay. Well then, if you're done here, please go home. I'm busy."

Grumbling, that was all he said. As if he had lost interest, his gaze returned to the desk. It felt like there was a thick border around that surly attitude. Despite

that, Ainz was relieved.

This sort of person wore their heart on their sleeve and spoke candidly. If they straight up said, “you’re bothering me, so get out,” to get rid of him, then from there even if Ainz were to display his abilities as a salesman, it would be extremely difficult to get them to look at him.

However, he hadn’t said anything like that. In other words—it meant that there was still room to get him to listen to what Ainz had to say.

While watching the back of the Chief Pharmacist as he was grabbing the mortar and pestle, Ainz asked him a question.

“What is it that you are making right now?”

“What’s it matter to you?”

There was some harshness in his words. He didn’t have time for useless conversations.

“—Is that right?” Ainz answered. After he let some time pass by, he then asked,

“...First, I would like to ask you about what medicinal herbs you use to cure a stomachache in this village. Is it Kiine peel <bark?>? Or is it Kandiane root?”

The Chief Pharmacist’s hand suddenly stopped. Just as he did a short while ago, he twisted his neck and looked over his shoulder to stare at Ainz a second time.

“Could you wait for a bit?”

“Yes, of course.”

The Chief Pharmacist turned his back on Ainz again and started grinding once more. However, even from behind, Ainz could tell that his attitude had changed a little.

It seemed that the basics of the salesman’s art of conversation—searching for a shared topic, like interests or hometown, with the person you’re talking to—from his time as Suzuki Satoru had been useful.

Hypothetically, consider the difference between a salesperson you had no common ground with versus someone with the same interests. If the contents of what they’re peddling, its appearance, price, windows of delivery, payment, and so on were all the same, then a business contact would usually choose the latter.

Since the Chief Pharmacist seemed to be a person who was passionate about their work, he had guessed the topic of medicines would be the best one to curry favor with him.

“I was just...making it right now. Kiine doesn’t grow around here. That’s why...we use Azen leaves. As you might know, when you grind up Azen leaves,

their efficacy quickly fades. However, it is also problematic if the speed of the grinding is too fast and they heat up." When he had finished grinding them enough, he poured a gooey liquid into the mortar. "This liquid is a secretion that comes from cutting into the Nere tree. By mixing it with this, there will be no change in efficacy. That being said, one more step is necessary because using it like this weakens its efficacy."

The Chief Pharmacist once again turned to Ainz and unreservedly scrutinized him from head to toe. His nose then moved like he was sniffing for something, after which he frowned.

"...There's no smell. Hey, show me your hands."

Ainz did as he was told and showed him his hands. Because Ainz more or less knew what he wanted to say, he showed him the backs of his hands—his fingers. For the time being, the Chief Pharmacist shouldn't be able to touch him with the distance between them, Ainz thought about what to do if the Chief Pharmacist were to approach him and searched for the words to explain it away.

"The smell of crushed plants—if you're a pharmacist, that smell that would naturally be soaked into your body, the residue that would stain your fingers, isn't there. I heard you were an Arcane-type magic caster but...does this mean you're performing the techniques of the pharmacists in some other way?"

Since he had planned on visiting this place, he could have crushed some medicinal herbs to cloak his body in their scent beforehand and gain the Chief Pharmacist's trust. On top of that, because Ainz's hands were just illusions, it was possible to make them hands the Chief Pharmacist would approve of.

However, there were two reasons Ainz hadn't done those things.

The first one was because the Bareare family wasn't like that. Certainly, that smell would drift out while they were working, and the smell that permeated their workshop and work clothes was quite intense.

However, it wasn't as if they were constantly cloaked in that smell. If anything, Nfirea and the rest of them seemed to be very concerned about nothing other than deodorizing themselves. Of course, that might just be the Bareare family, but when faking one's identity, your words and actions would be more natural by using a real person as a reference. You could finish without having to fret over every single word or comment and create lies.

The other reason was because Ainz was totally ignorant about herbal medicine.

Even if he rubbed on the smells, changed the color of his fingers, and assumed the identity of a pharmacist's apprentice, he would probably be found out when

the Chief Pharmacist asked him about dosing as he would not be able to give a straight answer.

If he was suspected of being a total fraud from that small tear in his disguise, then his activities in this village wouldn't bear any fruit.

"No, that's not quite correct. My master also practices Alchemy, it was nothing more than a little bit of the knowledge they had taught me."

This was accordingly in character for Ainz to aim for the last possible moment to avoid having his lies seen through, and so that no contradictions would arise from what he had said earlier.

"...Hmph. So that's it."

Ainz immediately sensed that the Chief Pharmacist had lost interest in him.

This couldn't be helped. You could also say it was exactly as he had imagined.

It was for this reason that he had prepared one more trump card to draw his interest. Ainz came closer to the Chief Pharmacist until he was standing next to him, who was once again facing his desk. Ainz placed his trump card among the things on top of the desk.

"...This is a potion that contains a healing power that was brought from a certain place."

That potion in the glass bottle—which was made in E-Rantel and didn't have a speck of refinement to it—was one of the potions the Bereare family made in the process of creating the red healing potion. The red potion was already completed—right now, they're focusing their energy on developing a version that used cheap alchemical solutions or herbs—so contrary to expectations, this potion was rarer nowadays.

"This is...purple?" The Chief Pharmacist picked up the bottle. "The container isn't colored...The reason it isn't blue...something is mixed into it?"

The Chief Pharmacist raised the bottle up and shook it while looking at the bottom.

"There's a small, really only a slight deposit on the bottom...yes...?"

He was muttering to himself.

"May I?"

"Go right ahead."

The moment Ainz granted his permission, the Chief Pharmacist opened the lid of the bottle and without any hesitation, lightly cut his hand with a knife. He then splashed the potion onto that small cut.

It was a fairly good amount. He had used about half the bottle.

The cut closed—you couldn't say that it was instantaneous—at a visible speed.

"That's fast…I couldn't even calculate the time it took…? The medicinal herbs and magical reagents used to make it…are in this deposit?

He sure talks to himself a lot, huh…Or rather, that knife, wasn't it the one he was using to chop something up until just a moment ago? And on top of that, he was able to use it in that way…Wasn't the effect not supposed to activate if you didn't use the whole thing, regardless of the wound? No, that was probably because in an extreme situation, like in the middle of combat, you wouldn't be able to consider things like wound depth to calculate the amount to use, would you?

The Chief Pharmacist licked off all the potion that covered his hand and then smelled it.

"I smell Azen…?" He seemed to notice that it was something else faster than Ainz could slip in a retort. "Is that not it…? Is it the smell of my own hand?…odorless and tasteless…for concealing?"

…Concealing what?

"No—" the Chief Pharmacist spun his head around and fixed his gaze on Ainz. "Are all the healing medicines of the city this color?"

"That is incorrect. I hear it was spread there via the undead king who rules over E-Rantel. I do not know all of the details of how it came to be but, well, it is valuable. In fact, the color of the common healing potion in circulation is blue."

The Chief Pharmacist heaved a heavy sigh.

"An undead king?…No, that's not the problem, I guess…though I also have a feeling that it is a problem, well, it's…fine? Mm. So, you wouldn't mind if I kept this?"

The Chief Pharmacist pointed at the bottle with about half of its contents left.

"Depending on the conditions." Upon confirming that the Chief Pharmacist was waiting for what came next, Ainz continued, "the price is information. If it's you, who has served the role of a pharmacist in this Sea of Trees, I believe you hold knowledge that can only be found here. I believe things would be balanced if it were to be in exchange for that information but…what say you?"

After silence had reigned over them for a little while, the Chief Pharmacist opened his mouth.

"…For what sort of purpose do you want to use that knowledge?"

If Ainz recalled the attitude of the Chief Pharmacist from just a little while ago, he would have a rough idea about the answer he would be pleased with. Those were probably the words, “to aim for the top as a pharmacist,” “I want to be an even greater pharmacist than I am now,” et cetera. However, Ainz could not say that.

“It is not that I have any particular purpose in mind. So long as I can get a hold of that information, I might be able to use it in some business in the future, and my thirst for knowledge will be satisfied.”

Just as Ainz had predicted, the Chief Pharmacist looked a little angry.

“…That’s what you want it for?”

“As I said just a moment ago, I am an Arcane-type magic caster. I pride myself on those abilities being extremely high, but my skills as an alchemist are non-existent, and my master told me that I had no talent in that field. Therefore, I do not have the least bit of intention to live as a pharmacist. However, information is another matter. Information is power, and a weapon. Those who have it and those who do not are completely different. Lastly, the debt of gratitude I would owe would be larger.”

“—debt of gratitude?”

“Yes. Since I have no intention to become a pharmacist, you should be reluctant to teach me your secrets—am I right?” Without waiting for the Chief Pharmacist’s reply, Ainz continued. “If that is the case, then the only question that remains is: can you offer me information that is equal in value to the unknown healing potion, an extremely rare thing, in exchange? Thus, the difference in this trade would become a debt of gratitude.”

“You might end up accepting information about trivial mixes or plants, you know? And then I might declare that I haven’t taken on any debt. Or, can I assert that the price I paid was higher and that you are the one who will be in debt to me?”

“Even so I don’t mind, you know?”

The Chief Pharmacist made a face that said, “what?”

“There are two demerits you receive by doing that. One is that you cannot lie to yourself. The feeling of guilt you’d get from exchanging some useless information for something really valuable would stay with you, would it not?”

“Hoo.”

“And one more. You would be appraised as a brazen and unscrupulous person.

Should there be a next time, our past association would be taken into account. And, if I were to talk about this in the city, how would the others—the pharmacists whose knowledge is greater than my own—feel about it, how would they think of you?"

"—I see. The knowledge of the savages of the frontier would be evaluated as only of that level, and the Dark Elves who live in this forest, and their pharmacists too, will be the targets of derision, huh. Would I be evaluated as a pharmacist who can't even discern the value of the medicine that was handed to them? Would I be considered a pharmacist who doesn't have knowledge that could balance out the trade? Or, would I be judged to be a greedy pharmacist who can't conduct business fairly?"

"Though you might also be praised for buying an expensive item for a lower price."

"…Is that how pharmacists in the city think? They try not to pay the proper price for the things they are offered?"

"Many kinds of people live in the city after all. I cannot say for certain that there are no people who are obsessed with the short-term benefits and do not have foresight. Well, those sorts of people will soon disappear thereafter because a second chance will not come their way ever again. On the contrary, it is those merchants who look after first-time customers who will be given a chance of success. As the saying goes, you must lose the fly to catch the trout."

"Heh-heh-heh," the Chief Pharmacist laughed in amusement. It was the first time he had smiled since Ainz got there. "You really are a smooth-talker, aren't you? You sure run your mouth a lot."

Ainz breathed a small sigh of relief. He had thought the Chief Pharmacist would be a much more emotional Dark Elf.

To put it bluntly, for a very average salesman, customers who put their emotions out in the open presented many, many problems. Personality-wise, the kind of people who prioritized their own feelings over the merits and demerits of an action, even after they were explained to them, were quite troublesome. Ainz remembered hearing that in most cases, those were the sort of people who would decide on the specifications one day and come back to say to change them the next day.

It seems that there was an opinion that if one were to be a first-rate salesman, that kind of customer would be a piece of cake to handle once they got their foot

in the door, but for Ainz—from the perspective of an average salesman like Suzuki Satoru—they weren't someone he would want to do business with.

"That is the first time I have been told that."

He really had never been told that.

"Isn't it just that everybody thought of you that way and just didn't say it out loud?"

Unlike a moment ago, the Chief Pharmacist seemed to be in a good mood.

"Is that right? Though I myself do not believe so."

"Heh-heh-heh—Now then, when it comes to the knowledge that will balance out the value of this potion, there's nothing I can offer except the secret medicines I know. How long are you planning on staying in this village?"

"It is not as if I have definitely decided, but I intend to leave this village in a few days. Perhaps around seven days at the longest."

The Chief Pharmacist's mouth twisted into a grin.

"I see…In that case…"

A few moments passed as he remained silent just as he was. Ainz didn't say anything.

"For the time being, if we only have that short a time, then it would be impossible to drill my secret medicines into you. For medicines that are considered secret, you must grasp the minute changes—the changes in the necessary ingredients in each season—recognize them by scent and touch, and finally, you have to carefully alter the amounts you use. Putting it bluntly, I want you to stay here for half a year so I can beat those changes into all five of your senses."

Ainz wanted to say, "you just have to write them out on a sheet of paper," but if he did, the Chief Pharmacist might be displeased, so he didn't say anything.

"Therefore, you don't mind if it's not the secret medicines—though I don't know if they'll balance the scales out from the perspective of value—but instead, medicines that are thought of as rare. You don't mind if I taught you the processes to mix them, their prescription, and other knowledge about them?"

"No, that will not be a problem. I shall leave it up to you."

"All right then—starting today, let's have you stay here and I'll teach you. Since we don't really have much time. I'm gonna beat it firmly into that body of yours."

"–What?"

That's a problem. That is absolutely a problem.

He wanted to decrease the danger of his illusion being found out by even a little bit. On top of that, his body didn't need to eat, sleep, or even use the toilet. No matter how well he acted, it was certain he would be thought of as abnormal and he would be found out.

"My apologies, but my niece and nephew are here with me, so I must decline that request. I do not mind if you reduce the number of medicines you teach me, so would you be willing to compromise? Because I am going to record it properly."

"...Oral transmission only. I won't allow a single record of them."

"That is a..."

Ainz hemmed and hawed.

He didn't have the confidence that he could memorize everything, even with instruction.

Certainly, for YGGDRASIL, the game he poured everything he had into, remembering the vast amount of information that was in it wasn't the least bit difficult. However, if you asked him if he could remember information that he had no interest in like in this situation, he would have to shake his head in the negative.

In general, if one were to look at it from a boss's perspective, would you not worry if you had subordinates who only listened to what you said and didn't take any notes?

The Chief Pharmacist probably took a different meaning from Suzuki Satoru's—a working adult who considered such things—silence. He opened his mouth.

"It seems like you're dissatisfied. But, you know? I won't even say that I want to know the production process of your potion. I'll spare you that much."

"Being told not to take even a single record is a little troubling...I do not have confidence in my own ability to remember things. Therefore, would you allow me to take just a few notes so I can remember.?"

"What the hell are you saying!" the Chief Pharmacist said, spit flying out of his mouth. "I'm gonna make your body remember! As a pharmacist's apprentice, you're receiving instruction so that you can immediately tell how much the amount of what you're holding right now weighs!"

It felt difficult to answer with, "No, I can't do something like that.' If that were the case, maybe he should lie?"

He held no intention of paying lip service to the idea that "you mustn't tell lies." There were even times for white lies. Maybe he should say that in this case, he shouldn't tell a lie with ill intent.

—This is so troublesome.

From the flow of the conversation, it appeared that he would become an apprentice and receive special instruction here, but the reason he had come to see a pharmacist was only on a small hunch that he could obtain information if there were any available. He had considered—if he was able to obtain even a fragment of the Dark Elves' herbal medicine and find out if it was more advanced than the Sorcerer Kingdom's—potentially importing it in some way like sending out technical intern trainees.

As a part of that plan, they would bring back the technology they learned and research it in pursuit of pharmaceuticals. It wasn't as if Ainz himself wanted to beg to be instructed on the subject.

Frankly speaking, he had said the price was information, but even if it were to be in the form of taking back a single bottle of a potion made here that had value, and then handing that over to Nfirea, there wouldn't have been a problem—well, maybe only a little one. There was no doubt that if it were him, he could analyze it and tell what kind of medicinal herbs it was made from and more.

Hmmm. Maybe the way I went about our first contact was a little mistaken? However…that was the only way to draw out his interest…You could even say that things proceeded this well because I had that. It's also not as if, when I think about the possibility that even the medicine we receive couldn't be analyzed, it would all be a total wash but…Now then, what do I do?

"What's the problem!"

It didn't look like Ainz would be given very much time to think. In that case then, just like always, he wouldn't leave things to chance.

"…Certainly, my master also said 'so your body remembers it.'"

The Chief Pharmacist nodded his head countless times while faintly muttering exactly, obviously, the city pharmacists get it too.

"However, in the same spirit, they also said this: 'take proper notes because you're stupid. So you don't make me say the same things over again and over again.'

"…Wha?" The Chief Pharmacist's eyes went wide open, and his eyebrows then raised in concern, and asked, "…stu…pid you say?"

"Yes, that is what I was told by my master."

"I-I see…No, no, masters are strict with their disciples. I don't think they were saying that seriously, you know? Look, what you were talking about just a little while ago was well reasoned, and was formed to seal off my escape routes. That definitely wasn't something someone stupid could do."

I'm being consoled…

It seemed that it was also the same for the Dark Elves, that they didn't know what to say when the other party themselves declared, "I'm stupid." Because the world they lived in wasn't a kind one, Ainz had thought that he would be cast away, but that didn't appear to be the case.

He had complicated feelings about it, but all he could do was capitalize on this. Ainz responded.

"No, I'm sure there's something wrong with me. My ability to remember things is weak."

"I-I see…"

Ainz asserted it with confidence, and on top of that, the Chief Pharmacist had averted his gaze as if his head had been pushed to the side.

They both fell silent.

There was a fairly good chance that the Chief Pharmacist would say that there's no way he could teach things that could turn into poison if the amounts were mistaken to someone like him.

However— "I get it," a voice that sounded like it had accepted something suddenly leaked out of the Chief Pharmacist.

When Ainz was wondering what it was that he "got," the Chief Pharmacist showed an expression that was akin to admiration but only for an instant. Since it immediately returned to the expression that wouldn't change from a little while ago, it was a momentary change that could make you think that it was a trick of the eye. It definitely wasn't Ainz's imagination.

In his head, Ainz slightly braced himself. He didn't know what it was, but it appeared that something inside the Chief Pharmacist had resonated with what he had said.

Ainz felt like he could see a demon he knew very well smiling behind the Chief Pharmacist.

…What the hell did I just imagine? That would be really weird, wouldn't it?

"…If that's how it is, then it can't be helped. Seven days at the longest, meaning

there's even a possibility that you'll leave this village even earlier, right? Repeating the same explanations over again means squandering even more of our time. Make sure to burn those records when you've remembered them properly, okay?"

He didn't know what had caused the change in the Chief Pharmacist's attitude. While keeping his guard up, Ainz answered as he normally would.

"Yes, I promise."

"You get it, then. In accordance with your request, I will teach a rather difficult mixture. My instruction will be strict, but you won't cry about it, will you?"

Ainz didn't remember anything about a request, but even leaving that aside for the moment, this was the only thing he should probably say right at the start.

"No, please teach me gently."

The Chief Pharmacist's mouth fell open with a pop, and then he made a face that looked like he had swallowed a bitter bug.

It wasn't as if Ainz had negative opinions about strict instruction. However, between strict and gentle, he was the sort of person who would choose the latter.

"You got some nerve…"

"No, but I wouldn't like it if you beat me with a heated pole or something?"

"Y-your master does things like that?"

"No, they do not do things like that, but—"

"Even I wouldn't do such a thing like that, alright!"

"I would be very happy if you did not."

When Ainz shrugged his shoulders like he was joking, the Chief Pharmacist looked disgusted.

"Haa. I think I understand your personality a little bit. Though I also do feel a little sorry for your master. Come on, I'm gonna teach you straight away. From here I'm going to cite the names of several medicines and their effects. If they're ones you know then it'll be useless…no, they can't be said to be useless? I guess it wouldn't be so bad in the sense that you'll learn about the difference in the ingredients used and more. Well, anyway, tell me which ones you want me to teach you."

"Thank you very much. However, before that, one question…Are you alright with a verbal agreement?"

If he were to say, sign a contract or cast some spell, it might be better to just have him pretend that everything they had talked about until now didn't happen.

"I don't care. Trust is important, right? Who knows, maybe what you put in writing will get passed around and get carried all the way back to me? All that'll happen then is I'll scorn you. 'So that's the kinda people city pharmacists are,' is what I'll say."

"I see, I understand. It's also a big loss for me if the assessment of the city pharmacists was lowered. I absolutely promise not to put them in writing and let them be distributed."

♦ ♦ ♦

Seeing off the back of the man until he was no longer in view, the Chief Pharmacist let out a soft laugh.

How long had it been since he had last seen anyone off? It might have been the first time since he gained the status of Chief Pharmacist in this village.

—He is a surprisingly shrewd man. Are there a lot of people like him in that city-place?

There couldn't be. No, if that were the case, it would be a crazy story.

I'd heard that the number of inhabitants in the city was greater than all of the Dark Elves living in this forest. That man should be counted among the upper echelons of them. If a man who thought that much was common in the city, you would have to be wary of the details so as not to be fooled, wouldn't you?

The man humbled himself as a failure and so on, but if that were true he wouldn't run his mouth like that. It was true even more so if he considered the flow of the conversation and the information that had been given to him, he would never go on a fool's errand.

If that were so, why had he been so hung up on writing down the Chief Pharmacist's teachings on paper? Maybe he didn't think the Chief Pharmacist, who had gotten angry with that, would reject teaching him?

However, the reason the Chief Pharmacist hit upon the idea that he had some kind of objective, was because he started saying things like his memory was bad, or calling himself stupid.

All the things he was taught, he could secretly write on paper later. In spite of that, it was necessary for him to declare he was going to take notes right in front of the Chief Pharmacist until it put him in a bad mood.

In other words—

—I didn't get it right away, but what that man wanted to convey to me was probably two things. One was that he's "not hiding anything."

Of course, he couldn't trust him just like that. It might be that even as the man showed him something true, he could be hiding something else behind that truth. Unfortunately, he couldn't fully trust a man he had met for the first time today that much. And yet, for him to say "I will not cover anything up and thus lay my thoughts bare before you," held major significance for potentially building a trusting relationship between them.

And finally, the other reason he could never say out loud was probably him asking to be taught an appropriately difficult level of mixture even given his lack of time. One at the level of definitely not being able to remember no matter how many times he saw it.

He, who wasn't even a specialized pharmacist, trying to learn high difficulty level mixtures was outlandish. On top of that, pretty much all of the difficult mixtures utilized only precious medicinal herbs. Maybe it was for that reason he couldn't make a direct request himself.

In other words, he was a man who knew shame.

However, the Chief Pharmacist didn't think the second meaning was really a problem.

Originally, based on the conditions of the exchange of that unknown medicine—which he thought to be related to the one from legend—he had considered it to be okay to offer up his secret medicines.

The Dark Elves' secret medicines were split into three major categories.

The first one was medicines that could be made through difficult mixing procedures.

The second was medicines made utilizing extremely rare medicinal herbs.

The third was dangerous drugs that had an excessively potent efficacy.

Those were the three.

He had stated the first one as the reason why he couldn't pass on the secret medicines to him, but he considered teaching him the medicines that were in the second category.

It could be that medicinal herbs that are rare in this region might be abundant in the city or wherever, that was often the case with medicinal herbs. However, if he said that, it wouldn't have gotten them anywhere. Or rather, since those under the first category were impossible to teach him and there was no way he was going to teach the dangerous drugs in the third category, his answer had already been decided.

And in this case, he had also thought there would be a benefit for himself too, he could offer up the ingredients that were rarely found here and were highly prized even in the city at an appropriate price simultaneously.

If he returned to the city, spread the medicines he had been entrusted with, and they became precious materials as a result, then people from the city might come here to the Dark Elf villages to do business to try and obtain them. When he saw the purple potion, he knew that the city's medicinal use was at an appropriately high level. Having a chance to obtain that material and knowledge, even the Chief Pharmacist didn't think it sounded so bad.

Just from that man's arrival, he didn't know whether or not it would give rise to interactions between the village and the city in the future. However, even if you were to tell him that he should accept the request based on that practical perspective, there would be no doubt that the Chief Pharmacist would have frankly disagreed with that sentiment instead. If he had had a personality that could be influenced by some rational conversation on the merits and demerits, the villagers probably wouldn't mutter the word "obstinate" around him, and he probably wouldn't be without a wife at his age. It wasn't as if he didn't worry about it so long as he was esteemed by his fellow pharmacist friends, but as of now, he had yet to give thought to trying and changing himself.

That man talked about gains and losses. If it had been way before, it would have been an argument that he couldn't stomach. However, it was about his gains and losses as a pharmacist, interestingly enough. If in some far-off place his efforts as a pharmacist were mocked, he would have no way of knowing. He had no way of knowing, but if you were to ask him if he was okay with that, his answer would be "absolutely not."

Because he had perceived value in what that man had offered up, he couldn't relax if he didn't return something of equal or greater value.

He felt that the man really was a smooth talker, because he had attacked from the two fronts of logos and pathos simultaneously.

Normally, the one who taught held superior standing while the one who was taught held an inferior standing.

However, it wasn't like that this time.

Teaching was the price of that potion. What's more, the man had taken the stance of leaving it up to him whether or not he would teach him. At this point, you could say their positions were equal.

And that man immediately went on to say that he was going to take notes to

open up hostilities.

If the other party doesn't hide anything—and acts in a way that can gain my trust, then I should also adopt an attitude so that man will trust me. However—

That was an extremely different problem.

As he was returning to the sitting table, the Chief Pharmacist scrunched up his face.

I don't think I can do something like that.

The Chief Pharmacist himself knew he was bad at getting along with others.

Even looking back on the times he had passed on knowledge to the villagers, he could declare that he hadn't been a good teacher.

Flicking a glance at the dried leaves, which were a type of narcotic, that were on the medicinal herb shelf, the Chief Pharmacist shook his head. That stuff was aimed at easing pain and could also be used to eliminate stress. However, it wasn't very appropriate for an educator to use it.

"Nothing else I can do but try my best, huh."

The Chief Pharmacist mumbled.

But, well, it seemed like acting wasn't his strong suit. To go so far as to stare at me so hard he even forgot to blink…does it mean that he's that interested in me? Hehehe…he looked younger than me based on his looks, but he certainly is young…I guess he did have a pretty cute side to him after all, huh?

4

Ainz, Aura, and Mare were having their morning meal.

Of course, because Ainz couldn't eat, it was really just Aura and Mare who were eating. It wasn't only the dishes—which brought out the flavors of the ingredients—that the Dark Elves had provided them.

There were also things from Nazarick that Ainz had put into his Inventory and brought here with them.

After each bite of the dishes the Dark Elves had provided them, Aura and Mare would write their impressions of it on the paper next to them, they would then be shown to the intellectuals of the various races in E-Rantel and researched.

However, as of right now, they had not made a single surprising discovery—including things of monetary value. They didn't know what would happen to their relationship with this village hereafter, but there didn't seem to be any materials that they could use as the basis to form beneficial trade relations with.

The reason Aura and Mare were recording their impressions of the food after each bite was so that when they were asked about it, even Ainz would be able to answer.

However, there was just one problem: being used to the food of Nazarick, no good impressions of the Dark Elf cuisine came from the refined palates of Aura and Mare. But the only people who could possibly say "it doesn't taste good" to the people who made it were people who didn't consider others' feelings, people who wanted to worsen their relationship. In other words, and for the sake of the argument, children.

Therefore, their meal took quite a long time to finish.

They would take a bite, chew it, raise their eyebrows, and then write their honest impressions; after that, Ainz would flip through the notebook they wrote

in, knit his eyebrows, and finally write a more flattering impression. To write "the ingredients are fresh" every time would hardly qualify as a proper impression. For that reason, it was necessary to change up the words even if just by a little bit.

When they had finished writing down their impressions—which were so painstakingly hard to come up with that if they had a thesaurus, they would have immediately started flipping through it—Aura and Mare were exhausted. They looked as if they had been in an eating contest.

It was precisely because he knew how hard their work had been that Ainz told them, "thank you for your hard work."

At the sound of Ainz's voice, the two of them stiffened their faces.

"Nah, this sort of thing is nothing…you know, uncle!"

"R-right. B-because we just ate and wrote our impressions."

No, it was just as Mare had said. However, there was no way he could have said things like "yeah, you're right" or "exactly" since he had a body that couldn't eat. Their hard work had been for Ainz's sake from the very beginning.

Even if those two, who were children, were to give their honest impressions, it —probably—wouldn't be that big of a problem. The only one for whom it would have been a major problem for was Ainz. If Ainz were able to eat, he wouldn't have had to have them rack their brains this much.

It would never be enough, no matter how many times he thanked them. Although, if he were to declare his gratitude over and over again, the two of them would probably feel weighed down by it.

That was why Ainz didn't say any more than that, and asked for their impressions of the meal.

Those honest impressions were the same for both of them, and were the same every time. That said, he still had to know just in case.

"Maybe we should have offered them some well-seasoned food from the outset and told them that we eat this kind of food. If we had, they might have tried to make the same sort of dish."

"They may ha…might've?" while tilting her head in puzzlement at her own words, Aura continued. "Only sprinkling salt on the meat when you're grilling is simple and not a bad idea, but maybe their method of preserving the freshness isn't perfect. The gaminess of the meat really lingers in your mouth…right? I think there are people who would even say that's fine, but I don't really like it,

y'know?"

A fair amount of time had passed since she had come to this village, but Aura's way of speaking was still inconsistent after all.

"I-I agree. It's a little gamey."

"I see."

"The vegetables aren't too bad, but there isn't much sweetness to them and the bitterness or acidity would be the first things you'd notice about them. I might recommend them to people who like that sort of thing but…Couldn't they make condiments with fruit, I wonder?"

"I want some dressing."

"I see."

It really was the same as always after all.

"Then, I'm sorry but, could you two show me what you wrote?"

When he saw what they had written, he understood just how hard they had worked on complementing the food.

I really do appreciate your hard work. Ainz lowered his head to the two of them in his mind.

After briefly scanning over it—not that there was very much—and desperately trying to remember all of it, Ainz returned the notebook to them. With this, their morning preparations were over.

Then the next thing he should do was head to the office.

"Okay! It's about time, so I'll be heading out. I think I'll also be home late today, so could you go ahead and eat without me?

The two of them answered in unison. Just then, Ainz noticed that Aura looked like there was something she wanted to say.

"What's the matter, Aura? Is something bothering you?"

"Oh, ye, err, yeah, that's right uncle. You're going to learn how to make medicine today, too, right?"

"That's right, exactly. Today he's going to teach me how to make medicine that's a little more difficult. I used [Gate] to go ask Nfirea about the name of the medicine, but he said that even he didn't know it. Really, it would've been faster if we could use [Message] but," Ainz let out a sigh. "Well, when you consider that people who are enemies of Nazarick could possibly be using it, it might be better to just leave them as they are."

"—Is it really okay to do that?"

Aura's tone of voice changed, so Ainz also changed his tone to match.

If this was a question she made as a Floor Guardian, then it was also necessary for Ainz to answer as the ruler of Nazarick.

"I do not know…But, I have no intention of making that medicine, because if the medicinal herbs it uses also exist in YGGDRASIL, I will absolutely fail."

It was the same with cooking.

Because Ainz didn't have the required skill, he couldn't use medicinal herbs, alchemical reagents, or other things to make medicine in YGGDRASIL. But, by using the technology of this world and the medicinal herbs unique to it, he could make medicine. Therefore, when he was receiving instructions from the pharmacist, he had to first ask what kind of medicinal herbs they were using.

However—

"—There really are a lot of mysteries, huh. I can't use the medicinal herbs of YGGDRASIL, but what would happen if they were raised in the soil of this world? Would they be judged as being particular to this world? Or would that not work?

"P-probably the, umm, the latter I think."

"You're probably right. Then, what would happen if their efficacy dropped? Isn't it true that the efficacy of whatever is grown in a man-made medicinal herb field drops? According to Nfirea, the reason for not making medicinal herb fields in E-Rantel and other places is because of the soil, or because of insufficient nutrients. He said the effects were weak. Though it seems that is the very reason why he was conducting experiments by making a medicinal herb field in the middle of that forest."

"Yes. It does seem like that is the case. It was small, but there was one in the forest. Then there were also a lot of logs with mushrooms growing on them, as well as ones with moss growing on them. I remember seeing that kind of thing when I secretly checked in on them. It really is pretty tough to secretly get close to that village…"

Aura said earnestly.

The goblins under Enri's control were standing guard in a wide area around Carne Village. In particular, there seemed to be a being called the Goblin Trapper. Unlike damage-type traps, the alarm-type traps set by the Goblin Trapper were more difficult to discover.

"But, if there aren't enough nutrients, then I think we just have to use items and have Mare work hard on them…"

Upon receiving the gazes from the two of them, Mare shrank back.

"Uh, well, you see, I don't think it's something that I can't do, but I think what might be re-really necessary is the nutrients in the soil… O-Of course, I'm secretly doing that at night in the E-Rantel adventurer's guild's medicinal herb garden, but I also have a feeling that it's not really doing much good…"

Though they may look the same, when they actually tried making potions using the medicinal herbs from the guild's field, a troubling result appeared—there were signs that the effect was slightly inferior.

Was it because there was an overabundance of nutrients from what Mare was doing? A coincidence? Was something else lacking? Was there magic suited to medicinal herb cultivation? Because there were a great many elements that could be the cause of the problem, they had not yet been led to an answer.

"Even though several years have passed since we came to this world, there really are a lot of things that we still don't understand, huh."

"Yes."

"Y-yes."

Every time their knowledge bank grew, every time they discovered a thing they didn't understand, the mysteries of this world grew as if they were connected. Ainz didn't know whether or not you could say they were fortunate, but the only question that remained was if they were a high priority; as a result, the things they hadn't investigated and put off until later accumulated.

If they were able to leave it to the servants or summoned monsters, they might be able to solve them quickly, but unfortunately, servants and summoned monsters couldn't do a portion of the experiments.

Ainz had considered that at a minimum, the experiments had to be done by beings who were born in the same way that the NPCs or Players were created. However, if that were the case, then even if Ainz—a Player—and an NPC were to do the same things, there might be differences in the results. If he believed that it was necessary to investigate something, they would need to have Ainz, an NPC, and a servant—three people repeating the same experiment.

"If we do this kind of cultivation experiment, it might be fine to leave it to the people we have placed under our control, but important experiments and such can't be entrusted to those who could become our potential enemies in this world. And if that is the case, it means they must only be performed by those from within Nazarick…but we don't have that kind of leeway in terms of

personnel. It's a troublesome thing."

So that means while being on guard so that other countries' technologies don't make breakthroughs, we'll only be improving the technology in Nazarick so that it benefits us, huh.

It was troublesome but—

—There's no doubt that if I left it up to Albedo or Demiurge that they could take care of it one way or another. Those two are smart, after all.

Or rather, it was because it was those two that there was a chance they were already tackling it, so it might just be unnecessary worrying on his part. For the time being, he probably only had to raise the issue.

Just like last time, all I would have to do is make a summoned monster, write it down, and throw it into the suggestion box.

If he did that, he could avoid the danger of it appearing like he was "only just realizing that now?"

—Whoops!

"—Crap. It's already time! Well, I'll be going then."

Faster than he could even see the two of them nodding, Ainz flew out their borrowed Elf Tree.

As expected, there was no way he could be late. Even in his former working life, he hadn't been late even once no matter how absorbed in YGGDRASIL he had been, for instance.

Hurry up, hurry up.

Light shone on Ainz's face.

The sunshine falling through the slight gaps made by the thick branches of the trees told him the weather would be good again today.

With the sounds of their master's footsteps no longer audible to Aura, she finally opened her mouth.

"Somehow Ai…haaa."

Aura sighed. When she was alone with Mare, it was impossible for her to keep up the act. This was bad. On that point, Mare wasn't really acting like he was acting.

That's a little unfair, isn't it? Aura gave him a reproachful stare.

"Huh? Err, w-what's wrong sis?"

"Hm? Nothing at all. It's nothing, okay?" It wasn't as if anything would change by taking her anger out on him. Aura regained control of herself and said what

she was trying to say just a moment ago.

"Uncle looked like he was somehow having fun, didn't he?"

Mare nodded in agreement.

To Aura, that point was something she really didn't understand very well. "Hnnngh", she groaned. Her head cocked to the side as she asked a question.

"At any rate, he's been going to the Chief Pharmacist's place every day since we came to this village, but I wonder if there's any value in going that far?"

"I wonder about that…B-but, you know? Since even I can't cast druid spells that make use of these trees, maybe they also have independently developed pharmaceuticals, right?"

"Since that smart uncle of ours considers it interesting, that might be it but…in this kind of countryside village that's a little unbelievable, isn't it? In the first place, isn't it strictly the magic that makes use of these trees that you can't use?

"Hmmm…I wonder? If it were a different person, uh, they might be able to use it, but I get the feeling that it's like domestic magic for me. It's probably Elven magic that was independently developed in this world…But, even so, if uncle is going there every day, there would absolutely be value in just that, right?"

It was a sound argument that left her at a loss for words.

"Well, I guess that's probably it," Aura looked up at the ceiling and then once more returned her gaze to Mare. "Then, I wonder why uncle looks like he's having fun every day?"

"I-it's probably that, right. I-I wonder if he is just having fun getting ahold of new knowledge—information. Since uncle really values information."

"Aah, now I see. Uncle's like that, isn't he? That's probably the reason why everything moves according to his plans, right?"

It wasn't merely just that he was smart. That very attachment to information, what you could call a thirst for it, was probably connected to his wisdom to see through all.

She remembered hearing from Demiurge that he had fixed his gaze a thousand years ahead, but when she saw her master's attitude, she had no choice but to accept that it was indeed true.

(T/N: it was 千年 in the raw so Aura probably misremembered or it's a mistake by Maru.)

A sigh of deep respect and admiration leaked from Aura's lips.

As expected of the great personage who had brought together the Supreme

Beings.

For Aura, Bukubukuchagama was the greatest of the Supreme Beings. Ainz came in second for her, edging out Peroroncino. Ankoro Mocchi Mochi and Yamaiko were tied at a distant fourth. The rest of the Supreme Beings were all whatever. In Mare's case, his top three were the same, but everyone else was equal.

"As expected of uncle. And in exchange for that—" Aura's face was gloomy. "—When it comes to us"

Mare had the same gloomy look on his face.

"Y-yeah. Special information, the information uncle seems to be seeking out, we haven't gotten ahold of a single bit of it at all…and even so, we're doing it again, aren't we?"

"It can't be helped now, can it? Even I really hate playing House again, but then, what else do we have if we say we want to play a different game? There's no way we could lose, and if we lost on purpose it'd be a bother if they thought we were making fun of them, wouldn't it? So for the time being, that means it'd be better for us to get along with them."

The two of them were silent.

As things stood, they would be playing House again. However, they didn't have the perfect excuse to refuse to play it, nor did they have an alternative idea for a game to play. If this hadn't been an order from a Supreme Being, they might have said they weren't feeling well and avoided them, but they couldn't do that.

"…For the time being, we know my abilities as a Tamer don't work on Dark Elves, but that might be information that nobody else has verified until now," seeing a bitter smile appearing on Mare's face, she continued. "Incidentally, Level 100 Dark Elves are included in that."

Mare, upon remembering something, looked pretty disgusted.

♦ ♦ ♦

Under the sunshine that leaked through the gaps in the trees, Ainz was walking across a bridge that hung from a tree.

From time to time, he would see a Dark Elf waving at him. Not only that, but the Dark Elf walking up to him from the opposite direction would talk to him with a smile.

“Heading to the Chief Pharmacist’s place again today, Fior-san?”

“Yes, that’s right,” Ainz answered smoothly.

At first this fake name hadn’t felt right to him, but even though only a few days had passed, he was already completely used to it.

“It’s embarrassing, but my lack of talent is making my temporary master take a lot of time and effort to teach me.”

“You possess wonderful talents as an Arcane-type magic caster, Fior-san. But even so, it would be even more surprising if you also had talent as a pharmacist. It’s the same thing as there being no one who excels as both a ranger and a druid.”

Ainz had killed a magical beast—a Giant Hypnotism Python that had approached the village—using magic once. It was that course of events that led him to win deep respect from the Dark Elves of this village.

And so it was with the people who came to talk to him, and the people who waved at him. In all of them, he could see the respect hidden within them.

“I feel better from hearing you say that. I would love to continue talking with you like this, but it is not as if I can keep my temporary master waiting, so if you would excuse me here.”

“I am terribly sorry. I’m the one who should apologize for stopping you when you are in such a hurry.”

Exchanging ‘no, no, I’m the one who…” and other social pleasantries, Ainz started walking on. Finally, he arrived at the laboratory he had been frequently visiting these past few days.

While calling out “I’m sorry I’m late,” he entered the Elf Tree.

It wasn’t as if he was actually late. Rather, in this village, the only way of measuring the passage of time was individual intuition. Because of that, aside from the hunters, they had a loose sense of time, and hardly ever made promises based on it. Even still, they had a rough sense of it. Therefore, it wasn’t like it had been specified that Ainz must absolutely come at this time.

But even so, since he had been a little later than usual, he said it as a matter of courtesy.

In fact—

“—You’re not really late though?”

A voice called back from inside.

In the familiar sight of the work room, the Chief Pharmacist—with unfamiliar hand movements—slowly, ever so slowly placed the ground medicinal herbs on

a dish, without turning around to look at him.

Ainz, taking a seat next to him, took the loaded dish and placed it on the scales. On the opposite side there were weights that had been placed on the scale.

Unfortunately, they didn't balance the first time, so Ainz repeated the task of changing the weights several times until they finally became even. After that, Ainz wrote down the mass of the weights on the stack of paper he had prepared.

"By all means, please continue."

The Chief Pharmacist, who had been irritatedly watching Ainz place the weights, took the dish with the medicinal herbs in a rough fashion and transferred them to another vessel. He was doing it carefully, but there was no way he could get all of the ground up medicinal herbs off of the dish. A slight trace of the medicinal herbs, as well as the juice from crushing them, remained on the dish.

Looking at that with an irritated expression on his face, the Chief Pharmacist tried to transfer them one more time using a spatula.

If he had something like a rubber one, he might have been able to cleanly scrape them off, but unfortunately it was a wooden spatula. He was able to get most of it, but some still remained on the dish.

"Ugghh! This is such a pain in the ass!!!"

The Chief Pharmacist shouted while scratching his head in frustration.

It was definitely an attitude he hadn't shown to Ainz when they first met. In the few days he had been instructing Ainz, he had opened up and now openly displayed his anger at Ainz's proposed method by over-reacting. In other words, his reaction carried the meaning that they should "come on and stop it with this way of doing things already."

"Please bear with it, temporary master."

The Chief Pharmacist turned to Ainz with a sour look on his face.

Maybe if it were a woman or child, a different emotion might have arisen in him. Yet, even if a man—a full-fledged adult member of society—had shown that kind of attitude, Ainz wouldn't have thought anything particular of it even if they were handsome, for instance.

"...Don't make me do something that's such a pain in the ass. Temporary apprentice."

"No, I told you the reason before, did I not? And you agreed to it, did you not? It was not as if I forced you to do it, did I?"

"...At that time I thought there was logic in what you were saying, since there's no way something like a Giant could be in this village. However, I thought about it while I slept, and making you remember it in your head is still important after all. Why can't you just measure it properly yourself later when you've returned to the city..."

Maybe he was quickly losing his confidence, but the Chief Pharmacist's voice slowly grew quieter.

Meanwhile, Ainz mentally clicked his tongue. *So he noticed that, huh*.

He didn't know whether the Chief Pharmacist's act of noticing *that* had been fast or slow, but he had wanted him to remain deceived.

The reason why they were putting the medicinal herbs on a plate was because the Chief Pharmacist had tried to make Ainz remember it using his hands and tongue before.

If it were just his hands he could still fool him if Ainz worked hard at manipulating his illusion. However, tasting things was completely out of the question. Even if he were told to "understand the numbness when placing it on your tongue," it would be impossible no matter what for the tongueless Ainz. But, there was no way he could tell that to the Chief Pharmacist.

Therefore, he made an excuse. "Just as there are giants and other huge races in my city, there are also races like dwarves, who are smaller than us. I don't have confidence that the same amount of medicine would heal those kinds of people. And so, I want to correctly measure the amounts of medicinal herbs used for just one person's worth of the medicine that you are making for me and then I could make medicine for each race while taking into account their body weight and other things."

To the Chief Pharmacist, who specialized in treating Dark Elves, those would be the words that made him think that it certainly was a valid concern.

Ainz also didn't see it as a total lie. However, he also understood that it wasn't the truth, either.

This was because, if anything, Ainz's logic was reasonable in his original world, but perhaps not so reasonable in this one.

In this world, a different physical law—magic—existed. If that were the case, then things like potions, which had one foot in magic, could no doubt deviate from the common sense of the old world that Ainz knew.

In fact, even a small amount of potion healed a giant's wounds just the same

as it did for smaller races.

Of course, because the maximum amount of HP differed between an ordinary human and a Frost Giant, the amount of recovery would appear to be different. However, they were in fact the same. Of course, because he hadn't taken his experiments that far, this was just a guess. This was based on Ainz's knowledge of YGGDRASIL, which was the closest to the laws of this world. Therefore, it didn't mean that there was no chance that the content of what he said would match.

If I think about it, it might have been better for me to say that I have a taste disorder at the beginning.

If he had, he wouldn't be having this trouble right now. That said, if he had told that sort of lie, he would probably have ended up bearing some other burden.

...Even if I regret it right now, there's nothing I can do about it. What I need right now is something to deceive him with, something he'll accept...but nothing's coming to mind. It was a failure on my part for thinking that I had deceived him well and for not thinking up additional excuses.

Ainz moved the illusory face and slowly closed its eyes. Since it was just an illusion, his field of vision remained as it was, unchanged.

Since those two had told him that, "your face is motionless, like you're wearing a mask," he had been intentionally closing his eyes from time to time. Because the parts of his face not concealed by the cloth were his eyes and eyebrows—the places where emotions were most visible—Ainz himself hadn't noticed that it would be a little unsettling if he focused his vision on one point and didn't move an inch from that point.

Therefore, under the supervision of the twins, he practiced and practiced. Now, if he consciously did it like this—the process of changing his expression was clumsy, and he couldn't possibly do it unconsciously—he had improved his skills enough to somehow look like he had closed his eyes.

How had he reacted to Ainz's silence? The Chief Pharmacist continued.

"Furthermore, doing this kind of thing is...that's right! Productivity drops, that's what it means. For the amount of medicine I can make in a day to decrease is a huge loss for this village!!"

It was a sound argument.

Because there were a number of druids in the village, though they were of a lower position, they could generally heal urgent injuries. However, those who

needed the pharmacist's medicines were the hunters and others who spent their time outside of the village—where the druids were not.

If a druid accompanied the hunters, they might be able to help them when they were injured. However, at the actual hunting grounds, a druid who wasn't good at concealment would be a burden on them. From the perspective of someone without much hunting knowledge like Ainz, he would consider saying, "why don't you just create a base camp and have the druids on standby there?" but this village had its own rules. In most cases, that kind of thing was borne from the results of trial and error. They had no knowledge of that practice in this Sea of Trees, and there was no way he could tell them that in his position as an outsider.

"In the first place, who can claim that there are no alterations to the medicinal herbs when placed on this dish, right?"

These scales and dishes were old ones used by the Bareare family, who as far as Ainz knew were the most outstanding alchemists in this world. Since even they were using something like this, there probably shouldn't be any problems with them. Of course, Ainz had already told him that. He had told him that these were things he had received from his master, so there shouldn't be a problem.

But even still, the Chief Pharmacist persisted "Did that master of yours use the same kinds of medicinal herbs? You can't assert that there have been no changes in these medicinal herbs, can you?" When Ainz was asked that, he was hard pressed to give him an answer. In fact, he would have to ask how they could have changed.

"So far as it goes, in regards to that, I said before that it is believed that there are no differences."

"You said 'is believed' didn't you? That's not a guarantee now is it? In other words, not even you yourself have the conviction that it absolutely will not happen—which means you're not confident, right? Are you okay with that? Medicine can sometimes harm people. It might change into something that harms people because of the alterations caused by placing it in this dish, right?"

"…First of all, I believe that will not happen."

"Of course, that may be true. However, to investigate if that is true, you will need to make all the medicines and confirm it, won't you? First and foremost, when you investigate, if there was a minute change, you might not know immediately that it had been altered. Then, when a few days or weeks have passed, it might change significantly. If it were used on a person in critical

condition, a life that could have been saved might change to one that cannot because of that small alteration, might it not?"

A sound argument yet again.

"Might," while he argued against that hypothetical, Ainz didn't have any proof that could absolutely declare that he was wrong. Thus, it was impossible for him to win the argument.

And adding on top of that, Ainz's knowledge was just a thin veneer. This was bad. He couldn't come up with a hypothetical story based on his knowledge as a pharmacist. If someone from the Bareare family were here, they could probably immediately refute it.

However, he couldn't back down here.

Considering the possibility that he would be instructed to remember with his tongue, he really couldn't back down.

"If that is the case, please just do it like that, temporary master. I will carry the data back to the city, and as temporary master told me to, I will make all the medicine and investigate the various effects."

Faster than the Chief Pharmacist could get a word out, Ainz piled on his declaration. To give an opponent a chance to counterattack was the act of a fool. Incidentally, because Ainz was a fool, he was constantly receiving his opponent's counterattack—he wondered if that was what they called friendly-fire? Especially from Demiurge.

"The number of pharmacists in the city isn't in the ratio as it is here. If I were able to gain their cooperation, I would be able to make a large amount of medicine at once, wouldn't I? Moreover, because there are various races living there, in order to investigate whether anybody can use them without any problems, I must also borrow the wisdom of the pharmacists of those various races, mustn't I?

The Chief Pharmacist looked just a little uncomfortable. The recipes of the medicines passed on to one's own tribe—be they secret or otherwise—being spread to many people wouldn't be a pleasant thing, would it? Ainz agreed with that. Rather than it being about protecting a vested interest, giving knowledge to beings who might become your enemies was sheer stupidity.

In fact, even Ainz didn't seriously intend to do that. That was just some appropriate words he weaved to trick him.

Ainz had also been taught this by his friends.

It was precisely because the fruits of knowledge were monopolized that they

had value.

"Since it seems that you have no objections, temporary master, if you would, please continue."

Upon receiving Ainz's counterattack, the Chief Pharmacist raised his voice in what sounded like disagreement. However, it seemed like a decisive way to mount his own counterattack hadn't come to him. Showily drooping his shoulders, he once more began putting medicinal herbs on the dish.

His movements were swift. It would be tough for Ainz to take notes while completing his own tasks like this.

It appeared that that was exactly what his opponent was aiming for.

Even though the Chief Pharmacist's own work was finished, if Ainz wasn't finished with his, there was no doubt that he would give him a snide comment or something of that sort. Rather than this being his attempt to say "let's hurry up and finish this unpleasant work," there was no doubt in Ainz's mind that this was his revenge for being beaten in their argument.

Don't you underestimate me!

Certainly, there was probably no way he could win against the Chief Pharmacist, who had spent many years making medicine, in terms of speed. However, he had also spent the last few days next to him repeating the same simple task over and over again. From the very beginning, he had no intention of admitting defeat.

Uooooooooooo! While his fighting spirit burned in his heart, Ainz also frantically started his work.

He capitalized on all of his experience up till now to instantly find the weights that suited the dish of medicinal herbs he was handed. If he didn't have time to take notes, then he just had to pound the information into his head. Ainz could never say that he had a keen mind, but that didn't mean his ability to remember things was non-existent.

As Ainz's speed increased, the Chief Pharmacist moved even faster.

They were both wordlessly absorbed in their tasks as if they were competing against one another—if a cool-headed third party were there, they would absolutely have thrown in a quip or two.

However…this is interesting.

While Ainz was remembering how to make the medicine, he thought about its effects.

This medicine's effect is very weak. However, if the medicine and that method are used simultaneously, perhaps they'll have an unexpected synergy?

To the Players of YGGDRASIL, using the absurdly large amount of data in the game to come up with new tactics was one of the most enjoyable things they could do. Ainz—no, Suzuki Satoru— was no exception.

Using the technologies of this world to create medicines that weren't in YGGDRASIL revealed the hidden possibility that they could be used in new battle tactics.

Using magic items rather than magic to compensate for your weak points…No, doing that would take time. Something that can be done in a much shorter period of time…

In practice, he would probably have to verify whether or not there was any synergy between them. Even so, Ainz felt excitement at the prospect of acquiring a new tactic.

I already have a connection…If I said something, he would probably teach me a lot more things…

The reason he hadn't done so was because up till now, Ainz had been spending all of his spare time to study something far more different. He had left the acquisition of the technology of this world to Titus and everyone else.

Frankly, managing an organization—a state—is impossible for me. Rather than doing that, wouldn't it be better for me to be placed in a position of technological research after all? Plus, I enjoy this more.

He once again thought about what he had vaguely felt since the beginning, when he started learning about the medicines here.

If Suzuki Satoru had had an outstanding mind—Ainz didn't have one though—he would have learned them both well. However, that was not the case. Despite that, he had divided his efforts on a field that he himself wasn't good at, you could even say that it had been a waste of time.

Until now, I was thinking about running away from work…No. People have areas where they're best suited to. When I return to Nazarick…I'll try requesting a department transfer from Albedo…But, that…wouldn't that be a betrayal of the NPCs faith in me? As the Guild Leader and the person who dubbed himself 'Ainz Ooal Gown,' is that the right thing to do? I wonder… what everyone would say…Ah!

At the sudden halt of the Chief Pharmacist's hands' movement, their contest and Ainz's thoughts came to an abrupt end.

The Chief Pharmacist turned around—towards the entrance.

Ainz looked as though a smile of victory was about to appear on his face, but he immediately amended that and looked in the same direction. It wasn't as if anybody was there. In that case, he tried pricking up his ears.

It felt like something was happening far away. However, there were signs that this noise wasn't from an emergency—like a monster attacking the village, or someone was wounded.

"You guys were the last ones coming from the city, right?"

"Huh? Oh, yes. I haven't heard that anyone except us was coming. …Could it be…?"

"Yeah, that's right. When someone comes to this village it's like this, I guess. They're also an outsider…There wouldn't be this kind of reaction if it were one of the Dark Elves from around here…Assuming that, maybe an Elf came?

Or maybe it was someone from Nazarick?

No, Ainz thought. If they wanted to contact Ainz, they had [Message] and other methods of doing so. It was hard to believe that someone from Nazarick had come. However, if the other party were an Elf, then only one sort of being came to mind.

"Could it be a peddler?"

"It…might be…Though I also have a feeling it's something a little different. Well, it probably doesn't have anything to do with us. If something did happen, someone should be coming right away."

The Chief Pharmacist answered as if he was trying to persuade himself that it was true, and once again turned back to the desk.

"More importantly, let's continue our work. You may have also been taught this by your master, but when mixing, there are kinds of medicines for which efficacy can deteriorate along with the passage of time."

Their work was progressing much more slowly than it had been just a little while ago, but they would soon be forced to interrupt it. One of the Dark Elves from the village rushed in completely out of breath.

"Mango-sa—!" the voice of the dark elf who had suddenly entered lost its vigor when he caught sight of Ainz.

"Oh,—Fior-san. Pardon me for interrupting your work."

There weren't any villagers who didn't know Ainz had been hanging around the Chief Pharmacist's house to seek his instruction. Yet, something had happened and he seemed to have forgotten that due to his impatience.

“…So there’s an apology for my temporary apprentice, but not one for me. What the hell is this?”

The Chief Pharmacist muttered, but he probably wasn’t serious about it. His face looked dissatisfied, but in some ways it also looked like a mischievous child’s.

“Oh! I’m sorry, Mango-san. Sorry for bothering you.”

Mango Gilena—that was the Chief Pharmacist’s name.

The Dark Elf who had apologized to him kept glancing over at Ainz; it seemed like he wasn’t going to broach the subject.

“Aah, if this is something that would be bad for me to hear, then how about I step outside?”

“No, it’s really nothing like that. But, you see. …Mango-san. An Elf came to the village just a little while ago, and they said that the country of humans outside of the forest is attacking close by.”

When he had said that much, he glanced over at Ainz once more.

“I see, if that is the case, it doesn’t mean that the country I live in is the one that attacked. I think it is, probably, a country called the Theocracy—a country that is near my own. I have heard stories about them attacking the Elven Country before.

An expression of relief appeared on the Dark Elf’s face.

“And the Elf came to tell us to be sure to send troops from this village. That Elf must also inform the other villages and has already left the village, but it seems like the Elders want to have a meeting about what we should do from here.”

5

Quite a number of Dark Elves had gathered in the plaza. It was likely that everyone in the village, excluding the children, were gathered here.

It seemed that they also used this plaza to hold meetings.

However, though it was called a plaza, because this was a Dark Elf village, it was mid-air. It was a place that looked like a giant tray held in place by the bridges that extended from the trees. It seemed like a place they couldn't use if it rained, but they didn't have a meeting hall in the village—there were no Elf Trees that could hold this number of people. Perhaps when there were far fewer people, they might have done it in one of the Elf Trees, but that probably wasn't something he should ask about right now.

Ainz was participating in the meeting as an advisor.

Frankly, he wanted to refuse the role.

He wanted to decline with all his might a position with that kind of responsibility. Was there anyone, anywhere, who would be happy with this unpaid role in the first place?

The most desirable thing would have been to participate as an observer, but the other side wanted him to participate as an advisor. Since Ainz himself had been drawn to the topic of the meeting, he was hesitant, indecisive, and so bewildered that he just nodded in agreement while in that state.

What had drawn his interest was, first of all, the outcome. There was a big difference between knowing and not knowing what sort of conclusion they came to.

Next was who was for and who was against it? In what sort of atmosphere would they conduct their discussion? The things he wanted to know—things he wouldn't understand just from hearing about it—couldn't be learned by just

reading the minutes of this sort of meeting. Even if some kind of conclusion came of this meeting as the consensus of the village, there would probably be people who would be dissatisfied with it or couldn't accept it. He hadn't decided on what to do about the village from hereafter, but it wouldn't be a bad idea to take the course of disposing of those who would bring detriments to Nazarick. If they were beneficial to Nazarick, he would bring them in individually.

If it were Albedo or Demiurge, they might be able to infer everything without participating in the meeting, but for an ordinary person like Ainz, that would be difficult to do.

While looking out over the assembled Dark Elves, Ainz suddenly recalled his time in "Ainz Ooal Gown." For instance, even in a virtual world, where faces didn't move, the atmosphere of a meeting was clearly felt.

Be that as it may, it was never that big of a deal. At those gatherings where things were decided by a majority vote, the ability to read the room wasn't that important. However, that probably wasn't the case here.

Being in this position might be unexpectedly convenient…If I leave in the middle and abandon my voting rights, then I won't need to take responsibility for anything, and it's not like I have any degree of experience advising in a meeting anyway.

To put it bluntly, Ainz didn't know much about meetings. Of course, he himself had participated in them before, Suzuki Satoru was a working adult after all. It would be rare for a company to not have any meetings at all. However, even if he did participate, his single vote was worthless. They were meetings in name only; they only served to receive orders from above. So his feelings toward them was only natural. Therefore, he only attended, nothing more.

Well then, how had it been since he came to this world?

Meetings in the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick were hell for Ainz.

Because the opinions of Ainz, the ruler, were always taken as being correct no matter how wrong they were, it was impossible for him to say anything wrong. However, since the Guardians recognized Ainz as their absolute ruler and—for some reason—a genius who sees through all, they would keep asking for his opinion. This heavy responsibility was one of the main causes of Ainz's psyche's deterioration.

Since my opinion is always prioritized in Nazarick, it sure would be nice if I could acquire some useful knowledge about how meetings are conducted. At this one, there aren't any conjectures about what the absolute ruler is thinking.

What he wanted to gain and what he was searching for were difficult for Ainz to put into words. Even so, he thought that if there was something that could expand his knowledge, he would want to obtain it.

At long last, the elders appeared.

They stood in the center of the U-shaped crowd, to their right and left stood groups of miscellaneous Dark Elves who looked like they were inserting themselves into the meeting. Ainz's position was in a spot that was a bit separated from where the elders were.

Hmmm, yeah, to be honest, I failed. Because I was hanging around the temporary master's house, I couldn't completely grasp the relationships between the Dark Elves in this village…

Even at this gathering of the villagers, there were people who he had exchanged casual greetings with as well as those whose names he didn't even know.

Ainz only worked hard on gathering intelligence on the VIPs of this village. However, if you were to ask him if he knew what shape the web of relationships took centering on those people, he wouldn't be that well informed.

That said, he had clearly explained why it couldn't be helped. Furthermore, even if he had worked hard and built relationships with them, he wouldn't have been able to become close enough for them to drop all pretenses and talk to him about anything in this short amount of time.

Adults…have a lot of things going on after all. I'd like to believe it's not like that for children though…

Based on Ainz's shallow knowledge of such things, there appeared to be no particular meaning in this arrangement of attendees.

While thinking that he wished everybody had nametags, Ainz used illusory magic to put on a serious expression for the time being and waited for the meeting to begin.

"Now then, let us begin," one of the elders, the younger man, spoke. "I believe you all have already heard about it from someone else. However, in order to determine what is factual, please allow me to explain it once again. Today, a messenger from the Elf King came to this village. He talked about how the country of humans to the north is launching an attack near the Royal Capital. Th—"

Many eyes turned to look at where Ainz was.

No doubt they were thinking the same thing as the one who came to the Chief

Pharmacist's house. That was the reason why he had to promptly deny it. It would be extremely inconvenient for them to have some weird misunderstandings.

"—Excuse me," Ainz raised his hand. It seemed that they didn't have that sort of rule, but he had interrupted the elder's speech, so he should at least do that much. "Just in case, let me say this. It is a different country than the one I come from. The attacking country is a country of only humans—an ethnostate where Elves are enslaved."

A few voices of hatred rose up from the crowd in response to the word "slave." No sooner than that could he hear whispers of "we know," "elves," and other things of less significance. Somehow, it seemed that a rather free expression of opinions was allowed at their meetings.

"The country I live in is as I have said previously, it's a country where various races live together. Because they are protected by law, there is neither hostilities nor persecution…Oh! That means they are not targeted because of their race. There are not very many criminals, but it is not as if they are completely nonexistent, so if you were to walk around dangerous places, then just maybe…I cannot state definitively that such a thing wouldn't happen. I am sorry for interrupting you."

Ainz lightly bowed his head to the elder and he responded in kind.

"So due to another country's attack, they have also requested for the Dark Elves to send soldiers."

"That wasn't a request!" one of the youngsters shouted, his hatred apparent in his voice. "It was an order to 'send.'"

Though soft, voices of agreement could be heard from here and there.

The elders also didn't immediately try to stop them. At the very least, they probably held the same opinion.

"Then what should we do? Thinking that we should discuss this, we held this meeting. We intend to take the consensus that emerges from this village to the other villages and discuss it with them. Therefore, we would like for you to understand that this doesn't mean our opinion as it is will become the opinion of the Dark Elves as a whole. In addition, even if we bring this village's opinion to our talks with the other villages, not only may it not be adopted, depending on the situation we may not even come to a conclusion."

To this elder's words, another one continued.

"—No, there's probably a good chance of that happening. There's even a possibility that this village, where everybody knows everyone else, can't come to an agreement either. As a result of that, it may come to pass that the Dark Elves would split up and live separately from one another as it had happened once in the past," the elder looked in Ainz's direction for only a moment. "Not seeing eye to eye is by no means a bad thing. However, by not being trapped by one's own opinions and exchanging them with others inside the village, we can acquire all sorts of ideas. We also believe it necessary to take a broader perspective on things to decide on our course of action."

How would that even work? Ainz, having experience as a Guild Leader, couldn't imagine doing that.

It would be wrong for the leader of an organization to support the idea of letting everyone do as they pleased and not unify their opinion.

If the members of a guild went against the guild's decision for reasons they couldn't accept, or that they didn't like it, then wouldn't it have been meaningless to create the organizations called guilds in the first place? The reason they were able to attain strength was precisely because they were unified; splitting up made everyone a good target to get crushed.

Be that as it may, Ainz didn't say any of those things.

Under these circumstances, it wasn't good for an outsider who thought that their own opinion was correct to impose it on them. To see it from a different perspective, how would you feel having an opinion forced upon you by an outsider?

On top of that, life in a dangerous place like the Great Sea of Trees might be the reason why they emphasized the idea of self-determination.

Though he had only lived here for about a week, Ainz got a strong impression that the idea of self-responsibility was stronger in Dark Elves than it was in humans.

When he thought about it, there seemed to be many problems with that way of thinking—one that had been cultivated for who knows how many tens or hundreds of years until now—being changed by the opinions of one foreigner.

The first one—

—Wouldn't the Dark Elves scattering be a benefit to Nazarick?

"It was for that reason that we had he who knows of the outside world participate."

The discussion suddenly shifted and Ainz, lost in the incoherence of his own

thoughts, lightly nodded in agreement.

"I do not know if I will be of any use or not, but I'll wring out as much of my wisdom as I can."

"OOH!" Among the voices of admiration that could be heard, a dark elf tossed out a question to them.

"So then, what is it that the elders are considering we do? Sending someone even though we have no such thing as soldiers in this village?"

"We agree with that opinion. We certainly haven't heard of a Dark Elf village being attacked yet, but that might just mean they are not being attacked right now. I believe you all know this, but our village lies on the outskirts of the Elven Country—and since it is located in the Southeastern tip, if the adversary is attacking villages in order, this village would be last, yes?"

"After they have exterminated the Elves, we the Dark Elves may not be safe. If that's the case, we should cooperate and drive them back."

"…That is where the question lies, elders. Just because the Elves are being attacked, that doesn't mean the Dark Elves will also be attacked, does it?"

That certainly was correct. According to Ainz's—Nazarick's—investigations, there was no evidence that Dark Elves were sold as slaves.

"And conversely, if we stood with the Elves and participated in the war, the human country might then regard Dark Elves as enemies. To begin with, can we even fight and win against the human country?"

The air trembled with commotion

It was a reasonable question.

The adversary had penetrated as far as the vicinity of the Royal Capital. From there it would be rather difficult to have a dramatic turnaround. If you thought about it logically, their prospects of victory were low.

"I endorse the elder's opinion," a dark elf said uncomfortably. "Melon. In the past, when we fled to this forest, the Elves accepted us. Do you not feel the need to repay that kindness?"

The dark elf called Melon, who had thrown out the question from just a moment ago, hurried to answer.

"No, that isn't what I was talking about. To fight or not to fight aren't our only options, right? For example, why don't we just invite the Elves to come with us and run away? This forest is still so big. I don't know what kind of creature the ones called humans are, but they're probably not more skilled at living in this

forest than we are. If we ran away, they might not pursue us…And if push comes to shove, we also have the means to migrate to a forest that is far away…Besides, why are the humans even attacking the Elves? Isn't there a chance that the Elves were the ones who attacked first?"

"…If that's what happened, then you reap what you sow."

The one who whispered that was the Chief Pharmacist. It was a quiet voice, but loud enough for everyone to hear.

"…Certainly, why are the Elven and human countries fighting? Are the humans also living in this forest?"

The elder looked at Ainz like he was asking him for help.

"—No, my deepest apologies, but I do not know the reason for the war. Rather than that, it is my first time hearing that the human country has penetrated this far. However, I do know that the human country lies outside the Great Sea of Trees. I do not think this a struggle for existence by any means."

"Was that right? This forest is too big for us to know everything about it, and that means the outside world is even bigger than that, I suppose… So what is it you think we should do?

What? You're asking me, an outsider, something like that? Well, this is awkward. For the time being, it doesn't mean the Dark Elves are absolutely one of the races I would want…

The existence of the Elf Trees and the Chief Pharmacist's knowledge were among some of the things he wanted, but they were not incentive enough for him to absolutely want them.

…But, well, it's not like I want them to die. I just have to steer the conversation in a direction where they won't die without lying about anything.

The faces of Aura and Mare popped into his head.

He didn't know if everything had been going well for them, but they might be saddened to know that the children they played with had died.

Ainz thought for a little bit and found his answer.

Yeah. Leading them out of this situation is impossible, since I didn't even prepare any presentation materials this time.

He hastily put together a plan that was full of holes; he wanted to avoid having it become the seeds of disaster. If that were the case, he should just honestly tell them what he was thinking.

"First of all, if you have a debt of gratitude, betraying that would be disgusting.

If something were to happen to you again, the Dark Elves would be considered a race that cannot be trusted, and no one would help you."

The elders nodded their heads in agreement.

"On the other hand, the guarantee of victory—not what the Elves believe, but based on the information that all of you have calmly collected—is it guaranteed? If your answer is no, then there is nothing more I can say other than the fact that all of you going to fight would be madness."

The youngsters nodded in agreement.

"Therefore, if it were up to me, I would choose something that didn't make use of either of those options."

Expressions of curiosity appeared on everyone's faces. While feeling everyone's gaze on him, Ainz remembered his time in YGGDRASIL when there were disputes between guilds. They would carry out a strategy where they joined both camps so that they would benefit no matter who won.

There were even nastier tactics for the same sort of situation, but Ainz and his friends only used those strategies because of their circumstances at that time, the Dark Elves certainly couldn't use them right now.

"First, each village sends a few people as reinforcements. Those people will probably die in battle, but you will still send them. The Elves will be certain to complain about the small number of reinforcements, but if you make excuses like 'we're taking the protection of the village into consideration as well, we could only send this number of people,' then even the Elves would probably not be able to say anything more. That is more or less the reason why you sent the reinforcements. In the meantime, the remaining people will evacuate."

When Ainz finished his explanation, voices saying "I see" could be heard here and there. At the same time, there were also voices saying "isn't that a little underhanded?" However, it appeared that there were many people who viewed it favorably.

"As expected of the Dark Elf who lives in the city. We would never have come up with such a thing."

Ainz made his illusory face change into a wry smile in response to the elder's words.

I'm not really getting much of a feeling that they're praising me.

However, it was clear to him that the elder hadn't said those words sarcastically or snidely.

At any rate, maybe the reason that something even someone at my level could come

up with but didn't immediately occur to them is because they're naïve…But the lizardmen used that precise tactic…Oops!

"Rather than it being because I live in a city, it is simply that I am just sneaky."

"No, it's nothing of the sort. Cutting off one part to save the others—it is a method that we often use in the vegetable gardens and other places."

The Chief Pharmacist spoke up and looks of shock could be seen on the faces of several people. Maybe he usually didn't make statements in this sort of place? Or maybe he usually didn't even participate.

"Thank you very much, temporary master, and there is something important I forgot to mention. This is the only thing I would like you to remember." After the attention of everyone there was completely focused on Ainz, he continued.

"That in the end, this is just my suggestion. It is only a single opinion. The ones to decide will be all of you who are up against time, because all of you will be the ones to bear the responsibility for whatever happens after."

This was the only thing he absolutely had to say. He should say it even if it was just to remind them.

It would be troublesome if they shifted the responsibility to Ainz because he proposed it.

Those few Dark Elves who were chosen would almost certainly die. No, having them die would be better for them as a whole in order to have an excuse for the Elves. If that were the case, the surviving families of the dead Dark Elves might hold a grudge against Ainz.

Therefore, he had to make them choose independently, so he could say, "wasn't it something you guys decided?"

It won't get through to people who have some misguided grudge against me, but there's no need to build a friendly relationship with those kinds of people. Punitto Moe-san also said that it's impossible to win over everyone into being an ally. But, if the parents of the children who played with Aura and Mare were sent, it could come back to bite us a bit into the future? However, it'll be a problem if I butt in about it. Although…just in case, I'll confirm it later…Considering how little time we have to work with, that's going to be difficult…

Of course, it would be different if Nazarick stood to benefit. He would butt in, loan out items that could be collected later, and exert himself to have them survive. However, those Dark Elves weren't worth him going that far. Since they weren't a people he would regret losing, he had no intention of putting in that

much effort for their survival.

As an idea in addition to that, he had wanted to suggest surrendering to the Theocracy, but that couldn't come out of Ainz's mouth. Well, he had absolutely no idea whether or not their lives would be spared if they did surrender, and it also wasn't always true that yielding bore good results.

"It was a wonderful opinion," the elder shifted his gaze from Ainz and turned it towards the Dark Elves. "Do any of you have any opinions on it?"

There were no voices of dissent.

Ainz's suggestion had been finalized for the most part; in fact, it seemed like it was a done deal.

From there, the discussion about how many people, who to send, and where to escape to, started.

Since they were going to have a meeting with several villages afterwards, making a decision right now might be too hasty. However, to hold off on deciding these things until that meeting would be a bit too slow.

Ainz looked over that scene in a complicated state of mind.

He felt his need for social approval and self-esteem had been fulfilled by having his own opinion accepted, but this wasn't like the joy that came from giving a successful presentation. Maybe it was because he didn't have a clear goal in mind this time.

It wasn't that he was leading them in a way that would be beneficial to Nazarick, it was just that his suggestion generated responsibility. The only thing he could do was to flee at once and have someone else shoulder the responsibility. Furthermore—they were already stretched for time. They had to leave right now.

"—This is incredibly rude of me, but it seems that my presence here any further is pointless, and it's about time I returned to where those children are waiting for me."

The eldest of the elders spoke as their representative.

"You have truly saved us this time. Later, we want to unify our opinion and propose it to the other villages."

While thinking that the elder didn't have to be so deferential to him, Ainz responded.

"If so, then on that occasion, would you mind not mentioning my name?"

"Wh-why not?"

"There will surely be those who would oppose it if they found out it is the

opinion of one who does not really have any connection to this village—and the Dark Elves who live in this forest."

Of course, his true intentions were different. His aim was to lower, by even a little bit, the chances of someone bearing a grudge against him.

"...No, there won't be anything of the sort. Though they may have left the forest, they are the words of a Dark Elf with whom we share the same ancestors with. There shouldn't be anyone who would spurn them. However...I do understand. Let's conceal that part of it."

"I am grateful for that. Now then...it is much earlier than I initially planned, but it is about time for us to leave this village and return to the city."

"What did you say!?"

"I am terribly sorry to spring this on you so suddenly, but if anything were to happen to those children, I would never be able to apologize to their parents."

"...Is the reason for Fior-dono being on guard...because the humans are that strong?"

For a moment, Ainz was baffled, but he understood that they were probably thinking that if people as strong as them were leaving the village as if they were fleeing, that might be connected to the strength of the Theocracy.

"I do not know about that. I am confident that I can win against ordinary opponents, but because there is no way I can know of all the powerful people of the human countries, what will happen is an unknown quantity. I am thinking that if there is even just a small chance that something could happen to the children, it would be awful."

The elder nodded in understanding.

"...While our parting is regrettable, I would like to get our things in order and leave."

"That is a...at least even a farewell party...Even though we haven't even held the welcome party, and now not even doing anything for your departure has become an embarrassment for us."

"Not at all, it will not amount to that. Right now it is a state of emergency. There must not be any hindrances to the village's safety in the future because of us."

Repeating their back and forth of "I want to have a party" and "You don't have to," Ainz ensured his victory to persuade them. "This is not our final parting. I pray that there will be a time when we can meet again." In the corner of his vision,

Blueberry was doing some kind of weird dance for some reason. Perhaps he had intended to introduce his child to Ainz at the party?

"Well then," Ainz said and was trying to walk off when an elder stopped him.

"Uh, Fior-dono. I had really thought that we would be able to discuss this when nobody else was around; this is a completely irrelevant question, but would you mind me asking?"

"What is it?"

"Has Fior-dono joined his hands with someone in marriage?"

Ainz was bewildered by the elder's question.

"If you don't have anyone like that, how would you feel about taking someone from this village as a wife?"

When he passed his gaze over them, there were no Dark Elves directing negative emotions toward him. On the contrary, the colors of expectation were in the eyes of the Dark Elf women. And it was not as if they were being sacrificed for the sake of the village, there were even people directing favorable smiles at him.

It wasn't as if Ainz was particularly knowledgeable about women. On the contrary, he didn't understand a single thing about them. However, even then, he was confident that the smiles the women had on their faces weren't fake.

"N-no, I will decline. That…the truth is, there are quite a lot of women who have approached me favorably, you see. It really is quite a problem, you know. Haha…"

Shaken by an attack from an unexpected direction, his way of speaking became a little confused. However, the elder didn't appear to be particularly worried about it.

"I'm sure it is. If it were a gentleman with outstanding abilities such as yourself, there would be many ladies who would hold affection for him."

It seemed that one's attraction to another changed with the level of one's combat ability, it was the same as it was in human societies. No, when looking at the attitude of the women, that tendency might be stronger in places like this with danger all around them. But, there were signs that the women seemed to have accepted his excuse just now.

This should probably be the last thing he said.

"These will be the final words I leave you with, but if all of you…if you were all to decide that you want to abandon this village and flee to the city where I live,

then I would be more than willing to help you. Should that need arise, do not hesitate to tell me. It may be a few months from now, but I would like to return to this village. If by that time it seems like you have reached the conclusion to abandon this village, I would like to have you bury a map with everyone's location on it in front of the tree I stayed in."

"…I pray that such a thing won't happen, but should the time come, we will be in your care."

The elder bowed his head and in time with that, all of the Dark Elves there bowed their heads as well.

Ainz, seeing that they had all raised their heads, announced, "Well then, I will be taking my leave here," he looked over at everyone and bowed his head. Finally, he sent a sincere and deep bow toward the Chief Pharmacist.

And then Ainz walked off.

No one stopped him—of course, he had thought that sort of thing wouldn't happen—Ainz walked until he was no longer in their line of sight.

The figures of Aura and Mare were there. His performance as an uncle had now ended. Their attitudes were those of Floor Guardians. Furthermore, Aura seemed to be extremely cautious, as she quickly ran her eyes over Ainz's entire body.

"Ainz-sama…I am happy for your safe return. However, did they do anything to you? Before Ainz-sama finally walked away there was an unusual presence being generated over there. It had the air of hunters with nocked arrows to it."

There was only one thing that came to mind.

"Ah, that was just a slightly bothersome proposal they approached me with. That might have been directed at me by the ladies. That being said, I'm fine. I deceived them properly."

"Is…that so? Even when Ainz-sama was walking toward us, a bit of that feeling remained. No, I had a feeling that it became even stronger."

Ainz knitted his eyebrows. It had appeared to Ainz that the women had accepted his excuse, but perhaps that wasn't true? In any case, Ainz didn't know what he should do about that. Plus, they were already heading home, so there probably wasn't a better way to deal with that than what he chose.

"Normally, I would've asked this beforehand, but is there anyone who is paying attention to us right now?"

"It's okay. There's nobody."

Aura assured him.

If that was the case, then there definitely weren't any problems. No, Aura already knew that, and that was why she tossed out that question when they met.

"—Now, I thought it was fine, but were you listening to what we were talking about?"

"Yes, Ainz-sama. I have already finished explaining the contents to Mare."

Rather than talking here, it would be better for them to return to their temporary lodgings and do it there. However, the two of them might have noticed something that Ainz had overlooked. Depending on what it was, and while it would be a little embarrassing, it might be better to return to that place and participate in the meeting one more time. For that reason, it was necessary for them to talk here whilst being aware of the danger.

"In that case, did you not have any thoughts about it? Let me hear your candid opinions."

The two of them looked at each other.

"There were no points of particular concern. I thought Ainz-sama's suggestion was perfect."

"Y-yes. From what my sister told me, uh, umm, I also thought that."

Hm? Could it be that they didn't notice that the parents of the children they played with might be sent to the battlefield—sent to die? Or is it that they did notice it, but they can't voice their objections because it was my suggestion?

If it were the former, it might make the two of them feel sad and put cracks into the friendships they had properly made. He should probably ask them about it a bit more.

"You know, the parents of the children the two of you played with might be sent off?"

The two of them had curious looks on their faces. After looking at each other one more time, they returned their gazes to Ainz. It was Aura who spoke as their representative.

"—That's right. Is there something wrong with that?" Her expression said that she was sincerely curious. "Is there something bad about that?"

"...No, nothing at all."

He couldn't ask them how they could make those sorts of expressions.

All that he could think was just that a friendship hadn't been born after all.

Or is it that...just as my friends prioritized the real world, these two are prioritizing

Nazarick…If so, then what's the right thing for me to do?

While Ainz was not sure what to do, Aura cupped her hand behind her ear, the motion of her trying to hear distant sounds better. Maybe some important topic had come out over there. Ainz was silent so as to not get in Aura's way.

"—Ainz-sama. It seems the subject of Ainz-sama has come up over there."

"Could you let me hear what kind of things they're talking about?"

"Yes. Generally, they're saying things like this."

Aura slightly changed the tone of her voice—although she wasn't very good at it—and let him listen.

"Why did you decide to keep it a secret that it was his suggestion?"

"Because the country he lives in is close to the human country. If the human country were to learn the truth, that he stated that opinion here, it might cause trouble for him in the future, don't you think?"

"The chance of that happening, is that what the elder is thinking about?"

"I don't know. However…isn't it matter of fact that we should do it so that something that could cause him trouble didn't occur?"

"—All the other villagers agreed with this and decided to keep it a secret."

"I see. Thank you, Aura."

"Uh, umm, the fact that Ainz-sama led them to this decision, err, won't be leaked, right?"

He didn't have any particular memory of leading them to it, and he felt the desire to ask Mare why he thought he had led them to it. All Ainz had done was make a suggestion, but more important than that was the following.

"So long as there is mind control magic, if we want to perfectly avoid information leaks, it will be necessary to kill them…"

"Are we going to kill them?"

"No, we won't. I feel there is no merit in doing so. No, should I put it like this? There are no demerits in the Theocracy finding out, because the Theocracy is virtually an enemy nation. It's not like I particularly want to deepen our ties to them, and supporting the enemy of your enemy is an obvious thing to do…No, that itself has merit to it. I had a false appearance and name. We'll have the Theocracy spend their efforts on useless things."

Ainz stole a glance at the twins' attitudes there.

"…However…I suppose it's too bad. If the Theocracy had directly attacked this village, we really could have gotten a lot more benefit out of it."

After the twins looked at each other and made curious expressions, Mare tossed out a question.

"Uh, umm, Ainz-sama? Why didn't you make them attack the village? Ah, err, we should have killed the Theocracy's soldiers, uh, umm, while disguised as Dark Elves and drawn them this way, shouldn't we?"

He was exactly right.

The benefits to Nazarick should be greater by doing things that way, even Ainz understood that much. It wouldn't have been hard to accomplish by causing MPKs. In spite of that, the reason they hadn't done that was—

(T/N: MPK = Monster Player Kill)

—*Because I didn't want to.*

Life in this village had been unexpectedly fun. Setting fire to this kind of village with his own hands felt distasteful to him for some reason or another.

That would be a very natural feeling to have. Nobody would want to do something they didn't want to do. However, that was an absolutely unforgivable excuse as the absolute ruler of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick. The one who was the head of an organization should prioritize the benefits of the organization. In spite of that, he had prioritized his own feelings.

In a sense, this might even be considered a betrayal of Nazarick.

So I told them to make friends, but I'm the one who enjoyed it the most. Is that how things ended up?

It would be bad if he wasn't careful so that he could prevent this kind of thing from happening again in the future.

Ainz had to think and act with the benefit of the Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick as his priority.

That was his duty as the sole remaining Guild Leader, and his role as the leader of the NPCs.

Swearing that in his heart, he was lost as to how he should answer Mare's question. He should probably apologize because he had honestly been naïve.

"…That's right. I also considered that. If it were to obtain benefits for Nazarick, that's what I should have done. Yet in spite of that, I didn't do it because I was naïve…That was improper of me as the ruler of Nazarick. I will strive so that this sort of thing never happens again."

The two of them were googly-eyed.

"Uh, n-no…I-it's nothing like that."

“That’s right. Everything Ainz-sama does is correct!”

While the two of them were comforting him, they had arrived at their borrowed Elf Tree. Once they collected the things they had left there, their preparations for withdrawal would be complete.

Since they originally had hardly any luggage, they finished right away and carried their luggage outside.

There, Aura lifted up her face. When Ainz followed where her gaze led, he caught the sight of the Chief Pharmacist running towards them.

He arrived in front of Ainz’s group right away.

The Chief Pharmacist was slightly out of breath. He possessed high abilities as a pharmacist, so he could be considered as a being of moderate level, but his physical stats were low. It was unclear what Class he had taken, but it probably raised Ability Scores in the same kind of way as an arcane magic caster did.

He didn’t have the air of someone who had come to give them a souvenir. No doubt he came here directly from the meeting place. Perhaps he had come to say goodbye?

“What’s the matter? I apologize for not being able to say goodbye to you directly—”

“—No, I thought I’d give a final present to my temporary apprentice. A number of the women are trying to go with you guys to the city. I know because I saw them dashing off to their own homes. If you really don’t want to deal with that, you’d best hurry out of the village.”

“What?”

“Whaddya mean, ‘what?’ They probably don’t intend to leech off you, but jumping into an unknown place, they’ll beg for your—the only one they can depend on—aid, probably as a tactic to slowly close the distance between you. Incidentally, if you can support them, our way of thought is that polygamy or polyandry aren’t really a problem. They’re probably thinking that it wouldn’t be too bad to reunite our separated tribes with you as the intermediary. And, if the other tribes find out about this too, well...I’m on your side so...you get what I’m trying to say, right?”

This was bad.

If they made contact with his body, his true form would be found out. He couldn’t guarantee that the women wouldn’t make those kinds of moves.

The Elves regarded the undead as enemies. That was the same for the Dark Elves.

Until Ainz had completely won over the Dark Elves, he couldn't allow them to know his true form. When he took placing the Dark Elves under his rule into account, he absolutely couldn't harm the women of the advance party.

"What? You didn't even imagine that it would come to this? Not even this much? C'mon now, are you serious? A guy as quick-witted as you? Perhaps you did think this might happen but you didn't think they would put it into action this quickly, or something? …Oh, come on. Be grateful I came to warn you, okay?"

There was only one measure Ainz could take—

"…Let's go, you two! We're going on a little run! Well then, temporary master."

—and that was to just run away.

Having barely finished his goodbye, the three of them slipped past the Chief Pharmacist and jogged off.

They immediately entered the forest, but they didn't stop. Naturally, they ran until they reached a point where they believed they could no longer be pursued, and finally stopped.

"…We're okay. There are no signs of any pursuers. So then, are we returning to Nazarick from here?"

Ainz, the sign of relief appearing on his face, grinned broadly at Aura's question. Of course, his actual expression didn't move an inch, or rather, he wasn't even controlling his illusion.

"We won't do that. Returning to Nazarick, assembling troops, and taking action isn't a bad idea, but I don't want to waste this perfect opportunity. The three of us—a select few—are going to carry out the strategy that Punitto Moe-san taught me in the past."

"Wh-what might that be?"

Mare asked, his eyes sparkling. Ainz was a bit happy. If Mare had taken an attitude of "whoop-de-doo" here, his enthusiasm would have diminished.

Ainz answered boastfully.

"Strictly speaking, it's a little different but—we're kill stealing."

Chapter 5 Kill Steal

1

The highest authority of the Theocracy's armies, the Grand Marshal, was said to have two right hands; General Valerian Ein Obinie and General Gael Russells Bulgari, each in command of a theater. Valerian was the one in charge of this war with the Elves.

A tent was erected near the Elven Royal Capital as a unified strategic command center which, at this moment, was occupied by Valerian and six other military strategists. In contrast to Valerian, who was over 50 years old, the remaining military strategists were pretty young, in their 20s.

Age was not always a good marker for ability, but for positions that required knowledge and experience, it was one of the more important indicators. So, it wouldn't be strange if one found the strategists too young for the job.

However, despite being young, they already had bags under their eyes and wrinkles etched into their foreheads. Their faces showed chronic exhaustion and they looked like they were running on fumes.

Valerian ran his eyes over the documents that were partly responsible for their exhaustion.

It was the casualty report of the Elven stealth raid last night—it was still early morning right now, so it had been only a few hours since the event in question happened.

"—that's too many."

Even though he had already expected these numbers, he couldn't help but be stupefied.

Fortunately, the Theocracy had an overwhelming number of divine magic casters compared to other nations. As long as they could retrieve the soldiers before they died, they could be healed. Due to this, the number of deaths was unusually tiny when compared to what one would expect from the corresponding number of soldiers who were heavily wounded. Most of the wounded should even be completely healed by now.

That said, there was an issue with the number of dead Elves they found in the camp. They were even fewer.

It was hard to think they took their dead and the heavily wounded with them considering that the Theocracy managed to fight back their night raid. So, it was probably accurate to think that the number of enemy corpses they found was pretty close to being the enemy's total casualty count.

The kill ratio was absolutely terrible.

"Yes. We ended up taking higher casualties, probably because the stronger Elves are appearing more frequently as we approach the Royal Capital." The strategist who compiled the numbers concurred with Valerian. "But, the enemy's main host is also originally smaller so they can't disregard their losses either."

A single hero could defeat a thousand soldiers by themselves. Likewise, a hero's death was also a bigger loss than the deaths of a thousand soldiers. Casualty numbers don't always directly translate to the proportional loss of fighting strength.

That was what the strategist is trying to imply with his words, but that's no consolation.

"The soldiers will be grumbling more now."

"That's a natural reaction. They've lost their brothers-in-arms after all."

Valerian replied to another strategist's grumbles.

It was normal for humans to want others to like them instead of being hated; subsequently, the possession of mutual trust with the soldiers, or the lack thereof, could greatly affect battle command as well. Furthermore, people like Valerian with Commander classes couldn't utilize most of their support skills if

their subordinates didn't wholeheartedly follow them.

"We managed to repulse the Elves' night raids so it's not like our defensive perimeter is at fault, but when the other side sends its elites out we need forces of the same quality to face them."

"You're right. We do have a certain amount of strong forces at our disposal but most of them are divine magic casters. When the area of expertise differs...an unbridgeable difference in strength is needed to erase that disadvantage."

Divine magic casters were stronger when fighting face to face, but rangers were better at night raids. The casualty reports this time were the results of that.

"What we need to do is to make our defensive perimeter stronger so that something like last night won't happen again. Does anyone have a good idea?"

Perhaps it was because they had been thinking about this since the raid, but multiple ideas flew out from the strategists immediately.

Some of them were things Valerian had already thought of, but there were also some he never had an inkling about. They could probably make an incredibly strong perimeter if they managed to use all of these ideas. The problem was that they would need a lot of labor and time if they wanted to put all of them into practice. So, they could only sieve through the ideas to find the good ones and put them to practice in order of their efficiency.

And most of all—

"—Your excellency. Does our focus on the defensive perimeter mean we will continue fighting here for a while longer?"

A reasonable question.

"You should have..." Valerian turned his gaze to look around at the others. "You all should have read the high command's orders. We will have to fight here for a while longer. Am I wrong?"

No one objected, but that didn't mean they accepted it either.

It was natural for them to not agree with him. He understood their thoughts and they certainly were not the kind that he could simply brush away as naïveté.

To be clear, their thoughts were correct.

The deaths from the Elven raid this time were unnecessary. They could have been completely avoidable.

The Theocracy had set up its main camp quite close to the Elven Royal Capital, a frontline it could barely support. You could say that it was advantageous for disseminating intel faster and they could immediately respond to any changes in the enemy's forces. But, there was also the danger of the main camp quickly

falling if, for example, the strong ones among the Elves resigned themselves to death and went on a rampage. Considering that the Elves were being pushed to the edges of despair, there was a very high chance of that exact thing happening now. There was no doubt the Theocracy should be making haste for a full-on frontal assault soon.

That was because if they made the stronger Elves occupied with their own camp's defense, it would lower the threat to Theocracy's main camp.

However, the Supreme Executive Council had ordered them to stop and leisurely exchange blows with the enemy here. These were the orders even as they acknowledged the threat of the night raids.

The orders were to establish the main camp at the very front to quickly respond if the Elves tried to escape from the worsening situation. These were reasonable orders. The orders also seemed like they were intended to bait out the enemy elites or the Elf King who rarely appeared. They agreed with this logic too, if not for the fact that they were not going to be assisted by the Holocaust Scripture in their efforts.

And why was it that they couldn't borrow the Holocaust Scripture's strength?

It was certainly not because their vice leader was killed by the Elf King.

The Supreme Executive Council excused it by saying that the Holocaust Scripture was assigned with some other mission, but no one here believed it.

Valerian knew the real reason; though the strategists here were all young, they too understood it.

They knew there were multiple reasons behind the Supreme Executive Council's refusal to permit the Holocaust Scripture's participation.

First, it was so that they could gain experience.

It was unimaginably difficult for humans who lived in the cities to live in such a forest. Unlike their life in comparative safety till now, they would have to be on guard against everything in their surroundings.

These battles were for them to address that issue.

Elves were supposed to be the stand-in for the monsters that attacked from the forest.

It would have been done differently if there were to be similar opportunities to gain experience in the future, but that was unlikely. In fact, it would be rather troublesome if such opportunities arose frequently.

That said, if they wanted them to gain experience, a mock setup in a safe place would work nearly just as well. They could use the Holocaust Scripture in place

of the Elves. There's no way that the Supreme Executive Council wouldn't have realized that. But then, why were they doing this—going even as far as expending soldiers' lives like they were nothing?

That's for—

A change in our mindset.

For soldiers who would have to defend many lives, hunter and ranger skills were probably going to be necessary.

They plan to make the soldiers gain the expertise of fighting in the forest using this war with the Elves, who were skilled at it. If possible, they would try to make the soldiers passionate about obtaining classes like ranger. The existence of the casualties was required to spark that change. The more casualties there were, the more soldiers would start to feel a sense of urgency.

So, they were denied the help of the Six Scriptures—especially the Holocaust Scripture, who could have blockaded the Elves entirely by themselves.

Valerian grimaced internally upon remembering the orders from the higher-ups.

He could understand their way of thought, but he couldn't really accept it.

"Your excellency. I have a proposal."

One of the strategists spoke with a stiff tone; he was the youngest of all strategists present here. Incidentally, it need not be said that the predominance of young strategists in this war was also a part of the plan for a change in their mindset.

Valerian nodded at the young man to continue.

"While we did expect these casualty numbers, they're close to our tolerance limit. It's probably going to be very difficult to take down the city, the enemy's base, with a single all-out assault in such a situation. Especially due to the fact that as long as the Elves who are taking part in the night raids aren't obliterated completely, we can expect further fierce resistance. I cannot accept spending any more of our soldiers' lives. Please, can't you test the waters to see if the Supreme Executive Council would change their plans?"

He probably understood that it was impossible, but his heart was likely softened upon seeing the amount of victims.

Valerian suppressed his urge to sigh. He could understand where the young strategist was coming from. This was a path every general had to tread through at least once in their life.

The value of a life—of the Theocracy's citizens in this case—was extremely

high.

Perhaps this was one of the weak points of the Theocracy.

This was certainly not a bad thing. No, in fact, it's the opposite. If given a choice between a nation where one's life was cheap and one where it's high, everyone would choose the latter.

It was expected for the Theocracy's armies to be soft due to them being protected by the heroes up till now, but the idea of keeping the deaths low was not wrong in itself. However, that way of thought belonged to those who didn't need to hold a weapon. Was it right for soldiers, whose line of duty included taking others' lives and having theirs taken, to have such thoughts?

There would certainly come a time when they couldn't win without any sacrifices.

There would certainly come a time when they would have to fight without the Scriptures.

It would be fatal if they refused to fight out of fear when that time came, if they considered their lives to be too valuable.

But, that didn't mean the soldiers' lives had to be seen as cheap. It only meant that the top brass like Valerian would just have to bear the pain, and come to terms with the loss of valuable life.

The young strategists here were now going through this pain. The results of that were quite visible from their expressions.

They probably couldn't even sleep soundly. The pained voices of the soldiers under them would probably never leave their minds.

Valerian felt a little pity for them.

This experience would have probably been a little gentler on them had it not been for the suddenly accelerated change in policy. The mental health of the strategists wouldn't have been as grounded down as they were now.

That said, they couldn't afford such leisures in this altered situation. More was being demanded of each soldier's individual skills as well as the quality of the generals who would have to lead them compared to before. The soldiers had to cultivate their strength and the commanders would need to be able to command their soldiers to die ruthlessly.

We are expecting a lot of deaths among the soldiers and even some injuries among the ordinary citizens in a hypothetical future war with the Sorcerer Kingdom. That's why we are having them experience death here...The Supreme Executive Council is really cruel...

“I can understand your feelings to a painful extent,” because everyone here, including him, also thought the same way. “Even so, we cannot change it. It’s not about the present, but the future.”

“…”

The young strategist let his face droop and then raised it again, looking at Valerian like he was his last hope.

“…at least, at least, please permit us to use large-scale attacks when we assault those tree freaks’ Royal Capital. Permit the use of high fire-power magic support to break the enemy’s interception line—the surrounding defenses. Never mind catapults, we are not even allowed to use fire arrows. There will be far more deaths under such constraints.”

“—I cannot permit that either. You can probably understand why, right?”

All of them were geniuses. They should have then reached the answer from what they knew about the Theocracy’s present circumstances.

He would be repeating himself, but it was better to say this out loud.

“Hereafter, we may not be able to avoid confrontation with that evil Sorcerer Kingdom. When that time comes, we can evacuate the citizenry here if we can take this city without damage…probably. That’s why we stopped cutting the trees from a point mid-route. That is why I cannot allow large-scale damage to this city. Understood?”

“So that’s how it is. The Supreme Executive Council is acting under the presumption that there will be future hostilities with the Sorcerer Kingdom. …The Elven city was built using those guys’ magic so it should be possible to rebuild it using the captured Elves even if we destroy a part of it by fire. Is it not?”

Valerian agreed with another strategist’s words.

“You’re right. I know there are similar opinions. I also heard another idea about building a city in a completely different place using those Elves. But, considering the time it would take, we cannot take such a course of action.”

There were certainly plans to use the captured Elves. It wasn’t that difficult to force them to cooperate by using something like charm magic. That said, using mind control magic multiple times in a short period would gradually make them more resistant to it.

Also, from the experiments conducted, they found that it would take a lot of time to grow the Elf Trees from nothing even if they used magic. They were unsure about how soon the conflict with the Sorcerer Kingdom would occur, but they had estimated that there was not enough time to create a city from scratch

for evacuation purposes.

So, considering that they would have to use what's already here, they couldn't go around destroying any more of it.

"The only thing that is permitted is breaking through the Elven city—their final defensive lines through brute force, while accepting the fact that we are going to take heavy casualties. Of course, the top brass doesn't want more people to die. Even a single extra soldier helps in our future war against the Sorcerer Kingdom. We should not lose them here if possible."

What the top brass was asking of them was truly unreasonable.

Valerian thought they were being contradictory, but he also understood that it was a painful decision for all.

"...Your excellency. The most important thing implied here is that those who defied death will gain strength, right?"

"Yes...you are right...It's exactly as you have said."

Valerian agreed with the words of the strategist who held the second most levels in the commander class here.

The Theocracy's policy until now was that one hero is better than a thousand soldiers. However, that was no longer sufficient. So, it started to put effort into improving each soldier's individual strength. That was why they were waging this war in such a brutal way.

The prediction of future hostilities with the Sorcerer Kingdom was at the root of everything.

And it was a fact that it was highly probable.

"Everyone, I know it's going to be hard, but please squeeze out every drop of your intellect so that even one more person can return to our homeland alive."

Everyone raised their voice in acknowledgment as Valerian bowed his head.

There's one more reason he left unsaid.

There was a person no one here in the camp except Valerian was informed about. He was waiting for them.

The Elf King was tremendously strong, enough strength to kill even those who were a step away from the realm of heroes in an instant. Yet, the Theocracy had a trump card that could certainly kill him.

That's the correct strategy. To pit the strong against the strong, a hero against a hero, and against those who surpassed even them—

But good military sense aside, he felt like the Supreme Executive Council was strangely fixated on having that person clash with the Elf King.

He didn't understand the true intention behind it.

But Valerian kept waiting.

For their final trump card in this expedition.

Right at that moment, a messenger entered, interrupting the meeting. With a tense expression, he quickly approached Valerian and whispered "reinforcements from the homeland" into his ears. "I see" Valerian replied, standing up immediately from his chair and announcing to the strategists who were looking over, wondering what this was all about.

"Everyone, there's no longer any need to defend the main camp. Redeploy those who were assigned to defense to the frontlines instead. Start preparing for a full frontal assault."

The long, long war was finally coming to an end. They were finally entering the final stage.

♦ ♦ ♦

Why are they fighting like that? Does the Theocracy not care about its soldiers' deaths?

It had been a week since they had left the Dark Elf village. This was Ainz's first reaction after observing the Theocracy's assault on the Royal Capital from a distance.

The Theocracy's soldiers made palisades out of trees and proceeded forward while pushing those palisades ahead of them. He could understand that they were guarding against those awfully precise Elven arrows, but still, it felt too wasteful. [bookmark]

As the palisades didn't provide protection against attacks from above, they were meaningless against special abilities like the one that could make arrows turn mid-flight. There weren't many with such special abilities so maybe they thought those losses were acceptable, but—

"—the Theocracy should have a lot of divine magic casters. Can't they just go all out with area-of-effect attacks? Elves had a positioning advantage at present. Shouldn't they summon angels to negate that advantage and attack them from above? No, they basically make their houses from trees so it's just wiser to burn them to the ground. There are a lot of trees around so why didn't they make siege machines from them and throw flaming projectiles from a distance?"

The stout and green trees weren't really that flammable, but the smaller branches and leaves were a different case. Plus, the smoke from those fires would also choke the Elves while obstructing their line of sight. The fact that the Theocracy's forces were not using even a single one of those methods looked very strange in Ainz's eyes.

And why aren't they deploying stronger people? If higher-leveled people similar to Fluder or Gazef were here, they could use far stronger spells or flashier attacks and turn the tides of the battle in an instant. There shouldn't be any reason to hold them back at this moment, right?

"Ummm. I can't understand their actions myself, but did you two manage to notice anything from the Theocracy's movements?"

Ainz asked the twins, who were watching the developments beside him. After a short while, Mare replied.

"Ah, well, maybe they aren't thinking anything...?"

"No, no. No way that's what it is. There should be some commanders or strategists in the army. It's hard to think that none of them had any plans. There certainly should be a reason behind those actions."

But he couldn't think of a reason. It was possible that some incompetent general managed to gain command authority due to politics and took independent action, scorning the strategists. Yet, considering how systematically they had cut down the trees and advanced their armies, he felt like that wasn't the case.

"Yeah. They are also attacking from other directions, but it's the same there as well..."

The Theocracy blockaded the Royal Capital in a semicircle and placed forces on the other shore of the lake to blockade the waterside.

"I don't see them using captured Elves as meat shields...it feels like they are pouring in the soldiers that they don't mind dying...does the Theocracy practice slavery?"

"No, even though they have Elven slaves, I never heard about them using slave soldiers. I think we already have a general idea of their political system...but it's hard to say that we know everything. Even so, I don't think they would do that, you know?"

"...W-what if they are s-summoned soldiers?"

"The soldiers hit by the arrows left behind their bodies, so I don't think that's the case either..."

As the other soldiers carried the fallen ones in a panic to the back lines—to the Theocracy's camp, it stood to reason that they were not disposable troops. Then, why are they not using the better methods at their disposal but instead letting those soldiers die?

Ainz searched his brain and finally squeezed out a single reasonable answer.

"This is just a hypothesis, but maybe they are fighting like that because they noticed we're here?"

"Eh?"

"N-no way..."

"No, it's too hasty to conclude that it's because of us specifically. Maybe they are faking it to give the false impression that they are idiots to their enemy nations or organizations while also keeping their stronger cards hidden."

The Sorcerer Kingdom couldn't be the only nation they wanted to mislead with incorrect intel. It was likely that the Theocracy had other enemies that Ainz didn't know about.

This type of misinformation campaign was something Ainz and others did multiple times till now. It seemed like the Theocracy had the same idea.

The Theocracy is a nation with a long history, so they probably have a lot of enemies too. But, is that really the case here?

He couldn't think of any other reason to hold back the stronger personnel... in this case, the ones they were guarding against would be...the Sorcerer Kingdom and the Council State North of the Kingdom? It was easy to imagine that the Theocracy's human supremacist dogma made for fraught relations with the Council State due to its racial diversity.

Umu. In that case, maybe we should form an alliance...No, Albedo and Demiurge have probably thought about this already. That said, there's no use for a superior who threw all the work to his subordinates. Maybe I should ask them about this later.

They had already formed a conjecture that the mysterious Riku Agneia who appeared at the tail end of the war with the Kingdom was likely related to the Platinum Dragon Lord of the Council State.

The only thing connecting them was the "platinum" theme they had in common. But, if that really was the truth, it would probably be a better idea to ally with the Theocracy against the Council State. Or, they could try allying with the Council State against the Theocracy while investigating their internal situation, that was fine too.

Whatever the case may be, they should make the first move before the Council

State and the Theocracy formed an alliance against the Sorcerer Kingdom. Of course, if even Ainz could realize this, it was highly probable that those two geniuses had already made plans regarding it.

...Ummm. Considering that there's a chance those two are making preparations for forming an alliance right at this moment, we should do our best to avoid getting discovered here. If we do get discovered, we can just kill all the witnesses.

"Ainz-sama. Should I then infiltrate the Theocracy's camp and gather intel?"

Ainz shook his head at Aura's proposal.

"No, that's something we shouldn't do at any cost." Ainz tried to explain his thoughts to the two, "let's see...say for example, if someone was hostile to Nazarick and was as powerful as I am, would it be possible for them to infiltrate Nazarick and steal the information they want?"

"Yes, it's possible"

"I also think the same. If there's really someone who is as awesome as Ainz-sama, I think they can do it."

"Ah, umu..."

He got extremely confident replies—including a rarely heard, clear reply from Mare—but those were not the answers he wanted.

"Wait, the question came out wrong. Right, let's see. Shall—"

—Not her!

He could easily imagine what the answer would be.

If he used Shalltear as an example, "impossible" would be Aura's immediate reply. It was the answer he had hoped for, but the logic that would lead to that answer in this case was not what he wanted. So, he couldn't use her as an example.

Then who would make for a good example, Ainz wondered.

Pandora's Actor...considering he can transform into other guild members, the twins' answer will likely be "possible." Demiurge...Ungh. It feels like he can do it easily... Aura...or Mare won't make for a good example. In that case...

"I am going to repeat the previous question. Hypothetically, yes, hypothetically. Imagine if someone on par with Albedo opposed Nazarick. In that scenario, is it possible for them to steal all the intel from inside Nazarick?"

"Eh? Albedo, you say?"

"E-excuse me, b-but did she do anything suspicious?"

"What! No, no, you are completely mistaken! I am completely sure that Albedo will never betray us!" Ainz answered in a fluster. "Didn't I say it was a

hypothetical case? And the enemy was only someone on par with Albedo, not herself? Yes. A hypothetical scenario."

The twins looked at each other like they didn't really understand it. Aura then answered as their representative.

"I think it's really not possible for Albedo. First, Albedo is not proficient in stealth skills. I also didn't hear anything about her having equipment with such effects."

"Well...you are correct but...Albedo is a tank after all...She certainly doesn't have those skills."

This ended up being a bad example too. "...disregarding that, do you think it's impossible even if she puts her intellect to work?"

"Y-yes. I think it would be impossible."

Well, whatever. He couldn't think of any other suitable person, so he decided to use Albedo's name while feeling sorry for her.

"Umu. That's right. I think the same too. Nazarick's multi-layered, multi-type defenses can't be possibly broken through by a single person's strength. In that case, don't you think it would be the same for other places?"

"Impossible. The Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick is a holy land created by the Supreme Beings. It is a special—place. There's no way any other place can be the same."

Upon hearing Mare's confident proclamation, Ainz nearly said "ah, yes" but suppressed the urge.

As a person who helped create Nazarick, Mare's feelings for it were a delight to him, but that was not something Ainz could openly express in this situation. He couldn't ask Mare to read the mood either—to understand what his superior was trying to say.

So, he decided to ignore Mare's answer for now.

"Well, I think it's something like this. If Nazarick can do something, maybe others can do it too."

Ainz alone couldn't steal the information from Nazarick. Similarly, it was likely the same for organizations built by other players.

No, there's no way he could be wrong.

If they could intercept the opponent's intelligence, then the opponent could do the same to them. They had to take action while under the presumption of that being the case.

That was why Ainz didn't send any spies into the Theocracy as he could see hints of other Players in that nation. The Theocracy was also a country with a lot of history. If there was a Player there, they would also have the advantage of experience accumulated over all those years the Theocracy was in existence.

There was also the fact that they managed to create a spell Ainz had no knowledge of, the one that killed the prisoner after they answered three questions.

"Of course, there will probably come a time when we have to make a move while acknowledging the risks involved. But, I doubt that time is now. Aura and Mare."

"Yes," the twins replied.

"We—The Great Underground Tomb of Nazarick— are strong. However, never think for a moment that we are peerless. Never look down on our opponents. Never forget to gather intel first."

Hearing another "yes" from the twins, Ainz nodded.

"Good! Then—maybe we should continue observing the situation for a while longer. The present situation is not quite suitable enough for our goals yet."

They were here to steal the kill. No, to be precise, it was a bit different from kill stealing.

Kill stealing was the act of killing a monster someone else was fighting to steal things like XP and stuff. So, it could only be called kill stealing if it involved them attacking either the elven country or the theocracy and hurting them in the process.

But that was not what Ainz was aiming for.

He was targeting the magic items in the Elf King's castle.

Families with pedigree like royalty were highly likely to have a collection of magic items valuable enough to match their status. The more valuable they were, the more powerful they tended to be. Their power could be considered a part of the owner's military strength from a certain point of view.

It was hard to think that the Theocracy would lose after they had come this far. In this case, all of the Elven Country's magic items would finally end up in their hands. But, Ainz couldn't allow a hypothetically hostile nation to increase its military strength. So their present aim was to preempt the Theocracy and steal the Elven Country's magic items before they could.

There was also one more benefit to this plan; they would not be opposing the Theocracy directly. Of course, if their actions got out, the Theocracy would

surely criticize them strongly. That said, the things they were going to steal weren't the Theocracy's yet, which made for a valid enough excuse.

All things considered, to describe this as thieves stealing from a burning house would be more accurate than calling it a kill steal.

Incidentally, Ainz did this many times during his YGGDRASIL days. He and his friends had cleaned out the enemy's bases many times, laughing when other guilds found them empty and raged. That was why this was the first idea he thought of.

But there's a problem.

Making a move here without knowing what kind of magic items the Elven Country and its royal castle held was not a good idea. They shouldn't assume that there were any in the first place. It was entirely possible that they actually don't have any magic items if their luck was bad. In that case, not only would they have to face danger with nothing to show for it, but it could also jeopardize their relations with Theocracy for zero gain. Originally, they should have gathered the intelligence first and then taken action.

Even if the Elven royalty possessed magic items, he could easily imagine that the dire situation of the war could force them to open the treasury and have the magic items put to use in the war effort. They could have also transferred them to a safe place elsewhere.

Unfortunately, they didn't have enough time to investigate.

"...Let us observe the situation a little longer and then enter the castle. It would be bothersome if they took away the magic items before we could get our hands on them."

"I can chase after them."

"Aah. That's an option. If Aura's the one tracking...no, we can't be sure the other party doesn't have any skills like [Forestwalker]. Our best choice is to get those items before they are whisked away. ...ummm. Maybe we should start sooner considering we still have to investigate where they are stored."

"N-now?"

"Yes. We should go right now."

Ainz looked at the Theocracy's assault.

It's been a week since they left the Dark Elves, so depending on how their talk with the other villages went, there were probably some Dark Elves fighting in there.

He felt a minor urge to look for them, but remembered the regret he felt

because of his misconduct as Nazarick's ruler that time. He should only be thinking about Nazarick's benefit now.

Ainz turned his gaze from the castle to Mare.

"Well then, Mare. Depending on the situation, you might have to act as the frontline—tank. You don't mind, do you?"

Ainz confirmed one last time.

"Y-yes. I-it's fine. J-just like the village, t-the Royal Capital is also c-considered a part of nature so t-there's no problem. I will do my best!"

Both Aura and Mare wore different gear from their usual set, especially their armor. Aura changed into an archer's attire while Mare wore gear focused on defense.

These were not provided by Ainz, but given to them by Bukubukuchagama. The quality was also a bit lower compared to their normal stuff, but as they were matched with the twin's abilities, their stats didn't decrease by much.

They were preparing for a stealth mission. Perhaps Ainz should have worn a different set of gear like the twins, made the twins wear Secret Shoes and covered all of their faces with a mask. But, they didn't do any of that.

The main reason for Ainz—whose appearance was the most well-known among them—to not change out of his normal gear was that since the twins had already changed into weaker gear, he decided it would be too dangerous if he himself was weakened too.

After some thought, Ainz came to an extremely simple conclusion: "Can't we just kill all the witnesses?" And so, they abandoned all thoughts of disguising themselves.

The twins' armor also played a small role in making this decision.

Even though they were just spares, their defensive ability was enhanced by data crystals that increased defense in return for sealing away an equipment slot. With Mare's head slot being the one sealed, he couldn't cover his face behind a helmet anyhow.

That aside—

—these ones are reversed for the genders as well, huh.

And that was not all.

He couldn't help but wonder why they were given armor like these, especially in Mare's case.

Mare was wearing something that could be called dress armor, showing a lot of skin and with his navel exposed. One could only wonder why someone would

even make such a piece of gear.

YGGDRASIL's armors' defensive stats came from a combination of the metal's quality, quantity, and the data crystals used. So even though Mare's navel looked defenseless, it was being protected by the data crystal's portion of defense at the very least. In actual terms, it could be said to be protected by a layer of magic.

Probably none of the ordinary people fighting here could even scratch his abdomen even if they hit with all their strength. Still, in YGGDRASIL mechanics, such exposed surfaces were more likely to trigger critical hits.

Frankly speaking, it was not something to be used as tank equipment.

Albedo's grim-looking armor was how tank equipment should look like.

Even Bukubukuchagama, while burdened with the racial penalty that disallowed wearing armor, did things like equipping shields in both hands or using special skills to harden her clay-like body.

So what was she, who was a tank herself, even thinking when she gave this armor to Mare?

The answer was probably "she didn't think about anything."

No. She definitely would have seriously pondered on it; though not about its fighting ability, but rather how to best satisfy her tastes.

They are siblings after all... Ainz thought, but he wanted to defend his past comrades in this case. Originally, Mare and Aura were only NPCs, so they wouldn't have changed gear on their own.

The navel-exposing armor Mare was wearing right now was an attire change and was never supposed to be used seriously. It was hard to think that someone would prepare useful gear for that. Bukubukuchagama should be praised here instead for the fact that she made sure the equipment had some utility even though it was just for fashion.

For some reason, the image of the sister with a smiling face—although she didn't have a face to speak of—and the brother who looked like he wanted to protest about something, flashed across Ainz's mind.

2

The Theocracy's assault turned fiercer, finally breaking through the capital's outer defenses.

Seeing that the Theocracy's soldiers had begun entering the city, Ainz and his party started to move quickly.

The first thing Ainz did after infiltrating the castle under [Perfect Unknowable] was to find an elf who was alone—with no witnesses around—and capture them.

After passing up multiple opportunities because of the possibility of being discovered, he finally captured a female elf who looked like a servant.

Ainz immediately charmed her and returned to the twins' location using [Gate]. Then, he questioned her just like they did with the elf before. Unfortunately, they weren't able to get much useful information out of the woman.

Realizing there was no more useful information to be gained from the elf, Ainz immediately killed her with [Death] without hesitation. There shouldn't be any problem with a single woman disappearing from a castle that was going to fall soon.

After divesting the elf of her clothes and other things that could be used to identify her, they moved her body to a faraway place—to the place they initially discovered the 'Ursus Lord—using [Gate]. The wild animals would probably pick her clean. Even if she was discovered before that, she would just be a mysterious corpse without a single wound. It's very unlikely that someone would connect it with Ainz and the others.

He thought it would be more natural to teleport her above the castle and have her die from the fall as it would have been a reasonable action for her in this

situation. However, given that they might need to use her identity later, he just made her disappear.

Some MP exhaustion was necessary to deal with the body, but with Ainz's MP recovery rate in mind, it was not a big deal. Plus, even if he wanted to wait until it recovered, they didn't have any time left to observe things from the sidelines anymore.

The Theocracy's forces were still having a hard time against the Elves' guerilla warfare in the city. That said, considering the difference in their fighting strength, their victory was just a matter of time. No strong individual had appeared on the field yet, so it was probably correct of them to think that there was no one like that present here.

The Elf King, who was said to be a strong person, was nowhere to be found on the defending side, probably because he had already escaped from this place.

In that case, the magic items would have followed him, rendering their actions here into a meaningless endeavor. Ainz muttered such thoughts internally and then called out to the twins.

"—Well, let's move."

They now knew the general position of their destination, but it was unfortunate that they didn't manage to find out the abilities and items of the king who was known as the strongest individual in this kingdom. Maybe they should have chosen a more important-looking Elf, but there wasn't enough time to carefully select their target.

There's only one problem left.

How should we—no, to be more accurate, who should be the one to conceal themselves?

In this hostile territory, each of them moving independently was out of the question.

They had acted out of sight up to this point, so moving brazenly in the open now would render all those efforts meaningless.

It would then be best if all three of them moved in stealth.

They certainly had the means to do that, but it also created a new problem.

Aura was the only one who could sense Ainz in [Perfect Unknowable] and even then, she could only sense that he was somewhere around them. Druids have a spell to see through [Perfect Unknowable] but Mare, who mostly specialized in the use of offensive spells barring a few exceptions, didn't have that particular one.

If Aura went into stealth with her Ghillie-Ghillie Cloak, even Ainz and Mare couldn't find her.

The Sunlight Dapple Cloak that Mare usually equipped had extremely high stealth capabilities outdoors, especially in the forests, but its ability would be reduced to half while indoors. Unfortunately, it seemed like this place was considered indoors even though the castle was made out of trees, reducing the cloak's ability to the point where even Ainz could sense him more or less. If both Aura and Ainz could sense Mare's location, it was highly likely that the enemy could as well, so it would be meaningless.

This meant:

If Ainz hid, Aura could find him but Mare couldn't.

If Aura hid, both Ainz and Mare couldn't find her.

Mare's Sunlight Dapple Cloak was weakened, and even if he used the Ghillie-Ghillie Cloak the result should be about the same. It's highly possible that a third party could discover him as well.

They finally concluded that if the three of them could not move covertly together, one of them should hide to act as their trump card in an emergency. While Aura was the most appropriate one for the role, it would be troublesome if Mare and Ainz couldn't grasp her location in a pinch. If they were too unlucky, they might even end up crashing into her while trying to move.

This is really a large mistake on my part...

They had a week of time to prepare. They absolutely should have discussed this before coming here.

Ainz went through such stealth operations many times in YGGDRASIL. For example, during Nazarick's first clear, they had to secretly travel through the Tuveg-filled swamps.

But, all of his guildmates generally prepared their own measures for stealth operations. As everyone was generally used to it, a little talk before taking action worked well enough for them even if they didn't discuss it before.

Ainz got a little excited at the word "kill steal" because it made him remember things from YGGDRASIL, so he completely forgot about discussing the plan with the twins.

Then why didn't the other two point it out to him? He didn't confirm if his hunch was true since that would be scary for him, but they were probably thinking that "Ainz-sama probably has some plans" with full trust in him. Actually, their eyes were gazing upon him with absolute faith right at this

moment.

He couldn't tell them that he had no plans right now. He spun his non-existent brain matter at full speed enough to heat his—also imaginary—brains. Ainz could instead ask them about what they should do right now, but they couldn't waste time here, so he should propose his idea first.

"—Then I will use [Perfect Unknowable], Aura will be the vanguard."

Ainz decided.

The twins would not hide. They would just have to rely on Aura's senses to avoid others.

If something unexpected were to happen, the twins would face them openly with Ainz ready to support them at any moment. He was more worried about them becoming separated during an attack than he was about them being discovered by someone, because they wouldn't be able to find each other in the first case.

The twins raised no objections.

Is it really, really fine? You can speak your mind if you notice something you know?

Honestly, Ainz would be happier if they had any objections.

Three heads together instead of using Ainz's alone would probably think up a better plan.

There was also the possibility that the twins agreed just because it was Ainz's plan. Strictly speaking, they were throwing the responsibility onto him. If Ainz overlooked something or his plans failed—which was a common enough occurrence—what were they going to do? They probably wouldn't say anything even if things went awry, but that was most definitely not a good thing.

...That's the problem with the NPCs. But...even if I force them to squeeze out some ideas here, there isn't enough time...Let's just ignore this problem for now and be more cautious the next time around.

He explained various countermeasures to Aura and Mare, and then walked after them into the castle with his spell active. There were barely any Elves, just like when Ainz infiltrated alone before, so they didn't meet anyone on the way. Of course, the fact that Aura was listening to the footsteps around them and timing their movements so that they would avoid them was also a major factor in this situation.

There were barely any people in the Kingdom's royal castle during its last moments as well, but they worked to create barricades at the entrances at least...

There were no such things here even though the Theocracy was on their

doorsteps. In fact, the mood here felt like nothing unusual was happening outside at all.

It doesn't feel like they intend to defend it...As I expected, did the country's upper echelons leave the city to its own devices and escape already? From what I've heard there doesn't seem to be any other Elven countries around here but the Great Sea of Trees is rather huge. It's entirely possible that there are lands further south with cities and we just don't know about them.

All this trouble would be for nothing if that's the case.

Anyhow, they would have an answer soon. It would be dumb of him to continue thinking about matters they could do nothing about.

The restricted area—likely the treasury—seemed to be on the upper floors.

It was two floors above the one where the king's personal room was and it was the highest point in the castle. He initially thought about entering it from the outside, but abandoned the idea when he considered that it was unlikely that such a place had windows.

And so the three of them continued to advance up the stairs.

They climbed the floors without getting discovered. Upon reaching the floor of their destination, Aura raised her voice with a hint of suspicion.

"What is this place even?"

The entire ceiling, which was about 15 meters high, was filled with lights covering all of its surfaces. There weren't any windows around so there was no doubt that it was done through some kind of magic.

But, it wasn't bright enough to be called dazzling.

Ainz moved his body a little to try and see if he received any debuffs.

It would appear that this was not the kind of light the priests would use that negatively affected the undead. Considering that this was the Elven Country, it was probably some divine magic related to the druids.

The phenomenon itself wasn't that weird. After all, Nazarick's sixth floor was similar. Even Arcane magic and Psychic magic had light-emitting spells after all, but the lack of secondary effects made it hard to know which type of magic this light belonged to.

But that was not what made Aura raise her voice. It was the thing directly opposite the ceiling, the floor—

—which was completely covered with soil.

Most of the floor, free of any walls or partitions and about a hundred meters wide in every direction, was covered by soil.

There were some areas free of the soil coverage but the area around the huge door further in was completely covered.

Aura lightly kicked the soil a few times and turned some over. It didn't take that long before she hit the floor beneath it. It wasn't that deep.

"A substitute for a carpet, maybe?"

Hearing that, Ainz felt like that was probably the case. The Dark Elf village didn't have a culture of using carpets either. They at most used some floor cushions weaved from grass.

"Eh—, wait...no, culture is a diverse topic, but doesn't this feel a bit primitive? Or is this a measure of caution? To make intruders leave their footprints?"

"B-but, in that case, s-shouldn't there be a patrol or a guard watching this area?"

Ainz concurred with Mare's words. There didn't seem to be anyone around here.

Too careless...to think no one's here...no, maybe even the ones who were here were mobilized to defend against the Theocracy's assault? That servant said this area was restricted, though nothing about soldiers being stationed here...

"...M-maybe they planned to cultivate vegetables and stuff if they ever need to hole up in the castle..."

Aura raised an "ah" in agreement with Mare's hypothesis. Ainz agreed as well.

It was possible for druids to cultivate crops here even though there wasn't any sunlight coming in. Maybe this light substituted for real sunlight to grow plants here.

Though the area Aura kicked over was shallow, it was near the edge. It was possible that the soil further in was deep enough to grow plants.

I can test this better if someone like Shalltear, who receives a penalty from sunlight, was with us here...I could use [*All Appraisal Magic Item*] *if it's a magic item, but...*

If they didn't find anything good in the treasury, they can try taking this along with them as a consolation.

Ainz settled on that decision and started walking after the twins. Those two used skills to not leave any footprints behind, while Ainz cast [Fly]—while maintaining [Perfect Unknowable]—to do the same.

As the group neared the center of the room—

"—Hoo. I felt some strange presence and came over to check but to think it was some Dark Elves. Twin kids at that."

A voice suddenly spoke.

Turning back, they found an elf standing about 10 meters away from them.

He had a cold-looking but handsome face, with each eye being a different color. He was definitely not a servant.

They could feel that this elf was used to ordering others around—one could feel the haughtiness that was radiated around him.

"—What?"

Ainz let out a surprised voice that no one else could hear. There shouldn't have been anyone there. He was sure. Ainz and Mare may have missed him but there's no way Aura would have as well.

He had not been invisible either, Ainz would have seen him if that was the case.

Maybe he deceived Ainz's eyes with a special concealment skill while using invisibility at the same time to hide from Aura. Or else—

—*He teleported here? Shit. I should have deployed* [*Delay Teleportation*].

Aura moved gracefully to position herself between Ainz and that elf while Mare took on a fighting stance, gripping his staff with his two hands.

In contrast to the twins, the elf didn't change his stance at all. Ainz found him full of gaps but maybe that was the opponent's attempt to bait them.

A skilled warrior could probably judge if he was being genuine or if it was a bluff, but Ainz couldn't.

Ainz moved a little and tried waving his hand at the elf.

The elf didn't turn his gaze at all.

So, he couldn't see through Ainz's [Perfect Unknowable].

Ainz turned to look at the twins.

His orders before the infiltration were, "in case we were to meet any mysterious individual, focus on gathering intel from them until they attack us."

Aura nonchalantly extended her hand to grasp her necklace. The twins probably intended to gather the information while having a discussion among themselves.

He could understand their intentions, but they were being a bit rash.

If it were Ainz, he would have immediately attacked the infiltrators if they made any suspicious movements before him. Touching equipment was the same as drawing a gun in his eyes.

Expecting the mysterious elf to start attacking them at any moment, Ainz readied himself to meet him with magic at any time. But, he ended up tilting his head in puzzlement after observing the elf.

There's no change in the elf's attitude.

He saw Aura's actions but didn't look like he was particularly bothered by them.

Was it because he was highly confident in his strength or was it because he couldn't understand what Aura was doing? Or maybe he was trying to gather information just like they were and so was hesitating to attack them?

"—nnnn. What's the meaning of this? Those eyes...I don't remember bedding any Dark Elves...No, maybe I did? Hmmhmm. Let me test you then."

The elf's air of intimidation became stronger. It even felt like the elf had swelled up a little.

Tch, Aura clicked her tongue.

"[Body of Effulgent Beryl]."

"Hoo. hooo. Hoo. So you can withstand this. This is probably the first time ever that I've seen someone being able to do that."

"Hey, why did you point killing intent at us? Do you want to die?"

"[Indomitability]."

"—hah, hahahahahaha!"

The elf laughed like he had just heard the greatest joke. Aura furrowed her brows in a manner that screamed "danger." She made a fist with a scary amount of force behind it, but gradually loosened it as Ainz continued to watch.

"[Greater Resistance]."

"That was splendid! No, no, I see. I see! I never even had an inkling. Grandchildren, I see. I understand now! So even if it doesn't awaken in the children, it could awake in the grandchildren's generation! To think that I didn't realize it, that was somewhat stupid of me."

"What nonsense are you muttering about?"

"[Greater Potential]."

"No, no, it just means I had the right idea all along. Well then, my grandchildren."

Grandchildren? What the heck is he saying? He seems to be having some sort of misunderstanding.

"Eh? ...No way, are you Bukubukuchagama-sama's...?"

That made Ainz panic for a moment. He realized that there was a possibility that Bukubukuchagama had arrived in this world alone and left this guy behind. But—

—there doesn't seem to be any slime bits left in him. Maybe he can change his form like Solution!?

"Chagama? What are you talking about?"

No...? In that case...could it be Akemichan-san!?

Yamaiko had a sister named Akemichan. She had made an elf character, but as she wasn't that into YGGDRASIL, he barely knew anything about her.

"Nnn—, you there, you are a pure elf, right?"

"...Oops. [Breath of Magic Caster]."

"What is this odd question—There's no way you don't know who I am, right?"

"We know, we know."

"Y-yes. We know."

"The two of you are shit at acting!"

Their perfunctory attitude and the monotone reply were enough to make Ainz retort unintentionally. The elf didn't believe them either, opening his mouth in surprise.

"T-to think that you didn't know...It's impossible... good grief. I heard Dark Elves live near the borders but to think you are so uncultured..."

The elf sent them an intense glare.

"I will forgive this once because you are my grandchildren, but ignorance is a sin. I will educate you thoroughly under my guidance."

"Even if you say you will teach us...wait, actually, who are you? I am just making sure, but you are the king of the elves right?"

Aura likely made that conjecture because the Elf King was the only strong person they were informed about.

"[Life Essence]. Hoo!"

Ainz let out a voice in surprise. The elf's HP pool was huge. It easily surpassed the Pleiades and was probably at least level 70 by YGGDRASIL's standards. This made him an opponent they couldn't be careless around.

"Haa...I am stunned. What did your parents teach you until now? There shouldn't be anything more important than the name of the pinnacle of all the Elven races...at present anyway, and the king of the elves, *THE* Decem Hougan"

Shit.

Ainz cursed.

He expected this, but he couldn't help but curse after receiving confirmation.

All their effort until now to stay hidden was in vain. He could only lament at all of their wasted efforts.

Now, they would have to kill this person, the greatest combat entity—

probably—in this nation, one that they could have expected to decimate the forces of their hypothetical enemy nation, the Theocracy.

They certainly couldn't leave him alive after this. Overwriting his memories was one option if they could incapacitate him and make him unable to resist, but after seeing his [Life Essence], Ainz realized that this king's battle strength—his HP to be more precise—was surprisingly huge for a denizen of this world.

Of course, they would win without a doubt if they fought normally. There are three level 100 entities here after all, but it would probably be hard to incapacitate him without killing him, as holding back here could turn out to be a mistake.

Considering his sudden appearance, it's highly likely that this elf—Decem—had some abilities unknown to them. It was dangerous to prioritize incapacitating him when they didn't have enough information on his true strength.

After seeing that Akemichan's name wasn't mentioned, he was 90% sure that there was no relation between them. If there was any, she would have named him something recognizable.

He would only kill him if they were driven to the wall, if he really was the Yamaiko household's child.

"The king? Is it fine for you to be here? Aren't the humans attacking? Why won't you immediately go over there and save your people"

"[Mana Essence]...I see."

Even Decem's mana was quite high for this world's denizens. It was about the same as Shalltear's.

HP and MP. Taking Elven culture into account, he most likely had the same class as Mare, a druid. A backline druid, to be specific.

"Why should I do something like that? Seems like you are misunderstanding what being a king means. A king is someone who should be venerated as a supreme existence by his people, not someone who works for them. Mercy is the only thing the superiors give to those inferior. Understood? And mercy can only be pleaded for, not demanded. They should be satisfied even if they don't receive it."

What the hell was this guy saying?

Ainz was stunned. If Decem was really being serious, then there's something wrong with his brain. Ainz even found the Elves pitiful for having such a king.

"So you don't feel like saving them? But, well—I can agree with a part of what

you said."

"Y-yes. We can't say he is entirely wrong either..."

"—Haa?"

Ainz stared at the twins' faces, flabbergasted at their replies. It didn't seem like a tactic to loosen the opponent's tongue by flattering him.

Which part of his utterance did they think was acceptable?

N-no, maybe it's me who was in the wrong? Maybe that is how a king should think...? Jircniv also had an air like that about him...How was the Quagoa King like? That one was too servile.

"Hoo. As expected of my grandchildren. Even though unlearned, your minds can understand the truth"

"—Ah, not again. I wasted time...I have my own tasks to do. [Magic Ward - Fire]"

"But you made one big, critical mistake. Only the Supreme Beings can be objects of veneration, not a small fry Elf like you. Well, you can get venerated however you want as long as it's only the Elves around here, I guess."

No, no...that's completely wrong...But they won't change even if I reproach them...and it's not like I don't understand their feelings...If only they made friends outside of Nazarick...From this point of view, I have hopes for Shizu who became friends with that girl with the scary eyes...This trip was a failure unfortunately. No, considering our talk on the way back, even Shizu's a bit...as I thought, only Sebas—Ah! I am thinking about useless things again!

"What? Supreme Beings? Did Dark Elves have such oral traditions?" Decem pondered a bit and slightly shook his head. "Well, whatever. I can just hear about it in detail later."

"Do you really have the time for it? Like I said before, isn't the human country knocking on your doors right now?"

Ainz was flustered at the time he had wasted, so he immediately cast the next spell.

"[False Data Life]."

Right at that moment, a rumbling came from under them, shaking the floor. It looked like the Theocracy finally brought out the siege engines.

The twins and Decem turned to look at the floor and closed their mouths. Ainz continued to cast magic.

"[False Data Mana]."

"—Tch. Humans are really troublesome. I could go over and wipe them out myself but...it's bothersome. Let's go."

"...Where are you telling us to go?"

"[Penetrate Up]."

"I haven't thought about it but, well, nowhere should be a problem with my strength."

"To think you had no plans, aren't you the worst...And what are you going to do if we follow you?"

"Is it earth...It would be a waste if I got it wrong..." Ainz hesitated for a moment before taking out a scroll and activating it. "[Earth Master]."

"Aah," Decem stared intensely at Aura's body. "You are still a child, huh. It will be some time before you mature...but there's nothing to be done about it. I have already waited for this long. A few decades is too long to be seen as a mere miscalculation, but we will just have to think of it as inconsequential. You asked what will happen if you come along, right? The answer is simple. You will have children with me."

"—Eh? What are you even talking about?"

"—Ah? ...[Greater Luck]."

"You too," Decem turned his gaze to Mare. "After the women become pregnant, it takes time before they can bear a child again. I expect more from you on that account. You will also be making multiple children alongside me. I assume the blood will be further diluted, but seeing how it awoke in the grandchildren's generation, it should be possible for the great-grandchildren as well. I should take time to experiment. Aah, it will be troublesome but I will probably have to take some people along with us to become your partners. But...why are you wearing a female's attire even though you are a boy? Is it the Dark Elves' tradition? Honestly, the fact that you are not a pure elf is a bit irritating, but it's far better than extending my hand to all the humanoid races."

Aura and Mare stared at Decem with their mouths agape.

"—"

"Well, I don't mind if you don't understand it yet. Let's go."

He was unsure what Decem was thinking, but he approached the twins who stood rooted to their place and extended his hand towards Aura.

—Ainz brushed that hand away. Determining the action as an attack, [Perfect Unknowable] got dispelled.

Before Decem could turn to look at Ainz in surprise, his bony fist planted itself

in Decem's face.

Decem flew away, sprawling on the ground.

"—This pedoshit pervert. To think you dare to stare lecherously at the girl entrusted to me by my friend. Die."

While he continued to hurl abuse, the small part of him that managed to stay cool clicked his tongue at his mistake.

He went through all that trouble to maintain [Perfect Unknowable], but ended up throwing a punch because he lost his temper. There's nothing more wasteful than this.

Ainz's emotions would be suppressed if they cross a certain line. He would have acted more rationally just now had that been triggered—instead of punching the guy, he would have cast instant death magic on him. However, it didn't trigger, probably because he was more disgusted than angry. The extent of that emotion probably didn't cross the line either.

"Wh, wha—"

Decem stood up in a fluster, with blood flowing from his nostrils. But, he didn't receive much damage. [Life Essence] showed Ainz that only a little bit of his HP was gone.

Even though he received Ainz's full-powered punch defenselessly, that's all it managed to do to him.

There's a possibility that he was faking it with a skill like [False Data Life] or some equipment, but that was most likely not the case.

Ainz showed his open palm to the twins, making a pose to tell them not to move.

From his estimates of Decem's HP and MP, he seemed to be above level 70 but below level 80.

That said, although it's very unlikely, they should be on guard against one possibility.

YGGDRASIL had no such classes, but maybe this world had some that wouldn't raise HP and MP when leveling up. Those could make it possible so that someone is at level 100, but their MP and HP would stay at level 70.

He would probably be right in assuming that there was nothing like that, but there is no such thing as an absolute.

—The three of us can gang up and kill him, but that's a bad idea for now. At least not until we figure out the method behind his teleportation...

While Ainz continued to think up their battle tactics for the hereafter, Decem

raised his voice.

"—An U-undead! Why, here, and so suddenly." He turned his gaze to the twins.

"Is one of you a necromancer!?"

Ainz answered before the two could speak.

"Just like you have surmised. These two are peerless necromancers, and I am their guardian who was born from the power of these two and their parents, from the combined powers of four people. I will definitely not allow the weak to touch them. I wouldn't mind you taking them away on the dawn of the day you defeated me but—" Ainz used his full effort to laugh scornfully, trying to anger the opponent. "—Well, I think that's impossible for you, right?"

"Hoo..." Decem removed his hand that had been pressing down on his nose. It seemed like the bleeding had already stopped. "I am a little surprised. To make me bleed...how many decades, no, centuries has it been? I see. You are strong enough to match your boast, but that's not the way to speak to a king. That said, this is rather fortunate. Rejoice, I shall teach you the difference between our strengths and discipline you."

He said those words while looking at Aura and Mare. It looked like he really believed Ainz.

So, Ainz continued to think.

Why did it look like Decem believed his (the enemy's) words without a doubt?

Did he really not have any abilities that could see through invisibility? If he had any, it should have crossed his mind that Ainz suddenly appearing was not because he was summoned, but because he was hiding using something like [Invisibility].

If he really didn't, then he was probably a specialized druid like Mare.

Or, in case this was all an act and he knew I was already here—a bluff in a sense—what is he aiming for?

He wanted to simulate what he would do if he was in that guy's place, but spending too much time pondering on it would look suspicious.

"Then why don't we fight one-on-one, fair-and-square? That should make it easier for my masters to understand who is stronger, you or them, right?"

Decem widened his eyes and laughed like he just heard an interesting joke. Meanwhile, Ainz used the silent metamagic to send a [Message] to Mare.

—Mare. That was a big lie just now. If it looks like I am in a bad situation, cooperate with me to absolutely kill that guy. Pass that along secretly to Aura as well.

Obviously, he had no intentions of handing the twins over to the guy. Also,

fighting one-on-one, fair and square in a fight with one's life on the line was an act of utmost stupidity. Some battles were fine to lose, but not those where people were trying to take each other's lives.

But—

Ainz felt like he had made a mistake.

He wanted to spend a little more time buffing himself, but there was no way he would let a pervert like that touch Aura. The elf also could have had skills to force teleportation that Ainz didn't know about, which would have been dangerous if he had let him touch her.

"The sight now—the sight of you two commanding an undead made me sure that you are my grandchildren."

Then, the floor moved.

Like waves receding back from the beach, the soil roiled towards Decem.

Ignoring it, Ainz took out a scroll from under his clothes with deliberate movement and activated it.

It was extremely wasteful, but he had no other choice. Until he knew how much the opponent knew, he couldn't let the enemy get cautious.

The activated magic was the Eighth-Tier spell, [Dimensional Lock].

This spell had the same effect as the special ability used by extra-dimensional beings like devils and angels. It blocked beings from teleporting out of a specific range with instant teleportation magic.

While he was doing this, the earthen lump that coalesced before Decem turned into something huge.

It was in the form of an elemental that Ainz knew.

He could hear a gasp of surprise from Mare, but Ainz was surprised as well.

A Primal Elemental!?

Upon seeing the elemental that couldn't be summoned by normal means before him, Ainz instantly raised his level of caution.

Unlike Mare, Ainz suppressed his sound of surprise from leaking out. One of the fundamental teachings of "PKing for Dummies" was that you couldn't let others find out that you knew.

Mare's surprise could be misunderstood as a kid's terror at seeing the elemental, but in Ainz's case, it would make it clear that he had knowledge about it.

So Ainz lowered his shoulders in an exaggerated manner.

"—hnn. So what? You created a big lump of soil called an earth elemental? Are

you going to make it fight me instead of fighting by yourself? Aren't you underestimating me?"

"Hohoo. So you know what this is?"

Decem smiled haughtily.

Good!

"—Of course. That's just an earth elemental, right? I destroyed one that was summoned against me in the past. Well, that wasn't nearly as large as the one here, so you should be quite strong to be able to control one so large. Size is one of the marks of strength after all, but size is not everything."

"Yes. You are correct. Dragon Lords who only have their large bodies to speak of can be defeated by Elves after all—But I am surprised. Your knowledge is not incorrect. You were right that this is an earth elemental. Hahaha. Your discerning eye—no, memory? I would bow to it." Decem's clearly scornful grin deepened further.

"—This is a rare chance, so why don't you take a blow with your body? A blow from an elemental you called trivial"

The Primal Elemental slowly raised its fist.

...It should move faster if it was a Primal Earth Elemental. Was this intentional? Well, I am thankful for it.

Its behavior, like a cat playing with its prey, was a welcome thing for Ainz.

Isn't this the best?

While hiding his smile—of course, his face won't move in the first place—Ainz tried to recollect Primal Earth Elemental's abilities.

The Primal Earth Elemental that was over level 80 played the tank role among the Primal Elementals of the same level. No, fundamentally, all earth elementals filled the same role.

Its attacks were considered to have nearly all of the metallic attributes under its level to be included in them.

For example, if beings like Lupusregina who had a weakness against silver got hit by it, it would trigger that weakness.

Also, as long as both the opponent and itself stood on earth, it would have a bonus to all of its stats, even though meager. But, that shouldn't work now as the original floor that was exposed after all of the soil had collected near Decem was made from plant material. It also supposedly had the ability to hide in soil, but that couldn't be used here either. All things considered, he could say that this was not a good battlefield for the Primal Earth Elemental.

What he should be on guard for were the punches from those fists. It was a simple way of attacking, but it was highly destructive. They were not exactly fast or precise, but it was hard for a backliner like Ainz to evade them. Furthermore, it does bludgeoning damage, which was particularly effective against Ainz.

It could also extend its arms like whips and do long-range attacks, but in that case, its power would go down a lot.

Just like its attacks, its defense was also supposed to have metal attributes imbued. It also had [Weapon Resistance V] against all weapons and physical damage reduction on top of that. Considering all of the above, it was the ideal tank and was troublesome to deal with using only physical attacks.

That said, it also had some weak points, naturally.

For example, it didn't have any dangerous trump cards—that is, it had no special skills. That meant that it had no attack that could turn the tide in a battle.

The other weak point was that everything that worked against metallic attributes worked the same on the elemental.

...Herohero-san could probably take it down easily.

It was weak to acids and—there was one more element it was weak against.

Ainz made preparations to take out the staff from his inventory when needed. He wouldn't be taking it out yet though.

Since the opponent was assuming that he was just a simple undead, he should play along and not display any skills that would put him on guard.

The question was whether or not he should take the incoming hit or not.

It would make for a good act if he made it look like that single attack was what made the undead being realize that this was no simple earth elemental. The demerit in this scenario would be that the enemy would turn cautious after seeing that one serious blow wasn't enough to kill Ainz.

...Right. There's no doubt that he is specialized in summoning. The earth elemental's attack will be more powerful than usual. It will be disadvantageous for the fight hereafter if I receive damage for no reason. In that case, what I should be doing here is—

"[Wall of Skeleton]"

Ainz created a huge wall made of bones in front of him at the same time the elemental brought its fist down. The wall was instantly destroyed and disappeared into thin air.

As I expected...did his mana just go down?

"—W-what is this!" Ainz exclaimed in a voice loud enough for the elf to hear.

“Why, why can it destroy my wall in a single hit!!”

“Hahaha. To think it was broken in a single hit from a simple earth elemental, isn’t your wall too brittle?”

Taking advantage of Decem’s good spirits, Ainz immediately shot a spell at him.

“[Lopsided Duel].”

This was a Third-Tier spell that made the caster teleport to the same place as the person he cast it on if they tried to escape by teleportation. Furthermore, even if the opponent was protected by [Delay Teleportation], it would still ignore it and instantly teleport the caster at the same time.

Still, this obviously had a fatal weakness. If the opponent teleported right into the middle of his comrades, the caster who followed them would also teleport to the same place and would end up as their punching bag. That was why, even though it looked like an extremely useful spell at first glance, it was relegated to the Third-Tier. Before it was patched, it could be cast on allies to teleport along with them. After it was patched out, the spell could only be cast on enemies.

So, Ainz should be prepared to escape if there were people on the same level as Decem waiting at the place he would teleport to. Luckily, [Lopsided Duel] had the small mercy of not taking the enemy along with the caster if it was the caster who used teleportation instead, so it would not be that difficult to escape.

“—What did you do?”

“...I cast an instant death spell. I see, so you already have measures against instant death?”

“...Well, it looks like you are somewhat intelligent, so you tried to deal with me after seeing that you can’t win against Behemoth. But, do you really think that I am weaker than the elemental?”

Summoners being weaker than their summons is impossible in YGGDRASIL, but you are probably the lower-leveled one here. Keeping that aside, why didn’t he answer my question even though he is looking down on me as a weakling? Is it because he really had no anti-instant death measures? And, what is this “Behemoth?”

Decem jerked his chin, making the Primal Earth Elemental lift its fists again. It was far quicker compared to the last time. He could also hear Decem cast a spell at the same time.

“[Mercy of Shorea Robusta].”

Tch. His use of Tenth-Tier magic was within my predictions, but that’s a really troublesome spell. Now I will have to use twinned metamagic to kill him.

[Mercy of Shorea Robusta] was a Tenth-Tier spell, and its mana consumption was one of the highest among them, on the level of [Reality Slash].

This spell had three effects.

First, for a limited period of time, it would gradually recover HP. However, the recovery rate was trivial and so it was hard to call it useful for people at this level range.

The second one was absolute immunity against instant death. There were far better spells in the Third-Tier if one only wanted to acquire resistance against instant death, but there was a reason why a lot of druids learned this spell despite that.

That reason was the third effect, which automatically resurrected the target when their HP reached ○ and died. This would not cause a drop in levels from resurrection. The trigger condition of HP going to ○ made it useless against deaths that weren't caused by damage like those by drowning, but it was still a very useful spell. Priests had resurrection spells that wouldn't cause level loss if they were cast right after death, druids also had spells like [Phoenix Flame], but many use this spell to cover for any careless mistakes. That said, they would be at low health upon resurrection, so they were very likely to die anyway after a few hits. Still, there were a lot of cases where people were saved by this spell.

Incidentally, it could avoid death from Ainz's ultimate skill, [The Goal of All Life is Death] as this spell was considered resurrection magic. In that case, however, the spell would end even if there was still some active time left. It was because the spell was dispelled after it activated the resurrection portion.

He is probably guarding against my bluff about using an instant death skill...I made a mistake. My bluff should have been about some magic I can't use. Let's do that next time.

"[Triplet Magic - Wall of Skeleton]."

As he expected, the first wall was destroyed with a single attack and the second wall soon followed. While the third wall was obstructing Decem's view, Ainz slightly changed his position, took out a scroll, and activated it.

[Piercing Cacophonous].

It was a buffing spell that he didn't really need right now, but he used it just to be sure.

Primal Earth Elemental attacked again.

The [Wall of Skeleton] shattered and—

"—[Triplet Magic - Wall of Skeleton]."

At the same time the first of the three new walls he created was being destroyed, he heard Decem chant a spell.

"[Aspect of Elemental]."

It's an Eighth-Tier druid spell that gave resistances similar to the elementals. It gave immunity towards bad statuses like poison and disease. Other than that, it also nullified critical hits and attacks with similar effects.

There was also a similar spell in the Ninth-Tier named [Elemental Form].

The areas Ainz specialized in were being mitigated one-by-one, which was troublesome.

That said—

—how much of his mana can I exhaust.

[Triplet Silent Magic - Greater Magic Seal]

Ainz changed his position a little more. With this, he had moved ninety degrees from his initial position with Decem as the center, he was now closer to the stairs.

The Primal Earth Elemental destroyed one more wall. Unfortunately, he couldn't make new walls of bone right now.

[Triplet Maximize Boosted Silent Magic - Magic Arrow]

His mana went down by a lot instantly.

Naturally, even a low-tier spell would consume a lot of mana after being strengthened by four metamagics.

If this Primal Earth Elemental was a summon, all it needed was a single successful [Greater Rejection] and he wouldn't need to prepare all these spells. However, if Decem really was specialized in summoner classes as he assumed, it probably wouldn't succeed in dispelling the summon even with their large level difference.

Plus, [Greater Rejection] could only dispel summons, not creations.

Could it be an Elemental Adjutant? If it was created by sacrificing experience, it could be maintained nearly forever. But, it looks like he was consuming mana to maintain it so that shouldn't be the case...I can't really gamble on it though.

Then, he should also be prepared for that possibility.

"Fina—" Decem stopped speaking, looked at the twins, and then looked at Ainz's position with a puzzled expression. "—Why did you move over there? Are you planning to escape while calling yourself their guardian?"

"Tch!"

"Hahaha! Then let me lend you a hand."

The Primal Earth Elemental landed a punch on Ainz's defenseless back as he

ran towards the stairs. The knockback caused by its gigantic fist blew Ainz away.

"Hooo? To think you weren't smashed in a single blow, it stands to reason why you would talk big. Well, your resistance was futile in the end anyway."

Ainz was sent flying away, but he managed to keep his posture with [Fly] and took his position before the stairs.

"But seeing that you are running away, can I assume that you are going to leave your masters behind with me?"

"There's no way I would do that."

Ainz created another [Wall of Skeleton].

"That again? How do you even expect to win without damaging my elemental? That is an idiotic plan you got there."

Upon hearing Decem's exasperation-filled voice, Ainz returned a sneer from behind his wall.

"Hahaha! I know that humans are assaulting this country right now. Hey, Elf King, don't you think time is on my side?"

"...I see. So that's how it is. Aren't you clever? But, that's meaningless. Your plan's impossible."

"What? Impossible, you say?"

"Yes. Did you perhaps think that something like humans could take me down? Me, the one who controls this elemental?"

I was exasperated at similar words I had heard from the guy who summoned an angel in the past, but the Primal Earth Elemental is truly a top-class being. ...Is the Theocracy attacking while knowing Decem's strength? If that's the case, it means that they have a method to defeat him. Yet, this guy looks like he hadn't even thought of that possibility yet. Either the Theocracy is ignorant, or this guy is. But, if the Theocracy really knew Decem's strength, would that person at that time really have called that the highest angel?

It's unsure what he thought about Ainz contemplating silently, but Decem spoke in an utterly fed-up voice.

"You should have probably understood it if you thought about it a little bit, right? You really are such a shallow person. Well, maybe it can't be helped. You are an undead after all. All you have is air for brains."

I don't know. If they are prepared for a fight with the Elves, it stands to reason that there's someone in the Theocracy's camp on the same level as this guy at the very least. In that case, time really isn't my ally here. I want to avoid consecutive battles but...

How much of his opponent's energy could he exhaust?

While thinking about that, Ainz cast another [Wall of Skeleton].

As he said to Mare in a [Message] previously, fighting one-on-one is an idiotic thing to do when one really wanted to win, but he had to continue doing so this time unless he felt like he was in danger of losing. This battle also had one more irritating factor.

He had to fight with a hand tied behind his back.

Ainz already concluded that Decem couldn't see through [Perfect Unknowable]. He could easily win if he used that.

But that wasn't an option.

Why?

What was the most likely development if he started to have an overwhelming advantage using [Perfect Unknowable]?

Or, say, what would happen if he used a high-tier spell like [Time Stop] and outed himself as a strong opponent?

Decem would likely run upon realizing that he couldn't win. Luckily, he wouldn't direct his attacks at the twins—well, he couldn't be certain of that, but it was very unlikely. That guy's aim was to capture Aura—and then, Mare. It was reasonable to think that he would not cause them fatal harm.

Ainz didn't want to let him escape without finding how Decem teleported here. He appeared suddenly, so he could probably disappear suddenly as well. No—in fact, he should imagine the worst and assume that he had the ability to do just that.

If he let this guy escape, this pervert could continue to aim for Aura and Mare forever.

That was one thing he certainly couldn't let happen.

The twins could be standing at a dangerous precipice depending on Decem's true strength, which he was yet to be certain about.

That was why he was putting into practice what he said to them with the [Message].

—He would be sure to kill Decem here, and not give him a chance to escape.

That was why Ainz didn't ask the twins to help.

Difference in numbers was one of the main factors that decided victory. The first thing Ainz would do if he were to encounter a group of opponents of unknown strength that outnumbered his group would be to escape. He should assume that Decem would do the same.

It was better not to make the enemy realize his disadvantageous situation

before he could create an opportunity to take them out. So, not only did he not ask for the twin's help, but he didn't even summon any undead.

His great lie about Decem being allowed to take the twins if he was defeated was also for the same reason.

By restricting his opponent's actions, Ainz led his opponent into not wanting to leave the battlefield and gradually made him not able to leave it even if he wanted to.

Su, su...what was it again? Yeah, the sankyuu-cost effect. The important thing is whether or not I can make him accumulate enough of it...I hope that he doesn't see through it...Let's just pray that he doesn't have much battle experience...I should break his will at the very least.

(T/N: Ainz is trying to remember "sunk-cost fallacy" and mistook 'sunk' with 'sankyuu' (how 'thank you' is pronounced in Japanese))

♦ ♦ ♦

"「S-scary」"

Upon hearing Mare's trembling voice echoing through the necklace, Aura immediately concurred.

"「Un. Scary.」"

"「So Ainz-sama can be this scary.」"

Aura and Mare understood well why their master was intentionally fighting like that.

To gauge his opponent—that was probably one of his aims, but that was not the only one.

He was aiming for one other major objective.

He was slowly dragging the opponent down like quicksand to stop him from escaping and would then go in for the kill.

When should someone choose to escape in a situation where they couldn't get a read on the other party's health? There were various opinions on this topic, but excluding cases like their attacks being completely ineffective on the opponent, it would be when their own health went below a certain threshold.

Then, what if their health mostly remained the same, but it was their mana that was getting worn down?

What if they already used a lot of their mana up till that point?

What if they felt like they could win with just one more push?

It was in everyone's nature to be reluctant to cut their losses even when they knew that was the right thing to do. That was why everyone made their own rules from their own painful experiences and the information they had gained from others.

That meant that when one's battle experience was meager and the information they had on their opponent was nearly non-existent, they would have trouble deciding on the right moment to cut their losses.

Their master saw through that very point.

Especially since the opponent was a king, someone haughty and inexperienced at battling others whose strength was on par with himself. He was pushing him to a point where he couldn't easily cut his losses and escape.

"「All of those shameful utterances were a bluff. Although it's rude to call him a monster, Ainz-sama really is one when it comes to a battle of wits isn't he... 」"

Aura's body slightly trembled.

"「It's understandable why Demiurge-san said that he is someone above even him...」"

Mare also trembled in sync.

"「It's also awesome how he is deliberately showing the guy that he is using the scrolls」"

"「All because he is trying to hide his own strength.」"

They couldn't help but feel fear at the deliberate actions he had taken. They also learned a lot at the same time.

Both of them felt how blessed they were to have one such as him standing above them.

♦ ♦ ♦

A new wall appeared the very instant the previous one was smashed apart.

Decem hid his irritation behind a smile, realizing that the opponent was uselessly stalling for time.

He wondered how many times they had repeated this. Though he didn't count because it was tiresome, it should be at least 20 times by now.

The walls were weak enough to break apart in a single hit, but the opponent

was deploying multiple at a time to avoid Behemoth's blows.

Mooks will use their brains in their own way...no, it's different. Maybe I should say that they need to be so desperate because they can only use such weak magic.

It was probably incorrect to call him a mook, but that undead was certainly weaker than his Behemoth. What Decem saw till now in this fight showed that he was right.

If that undead was stronger than Behemoth, he would have proactively attacked them. However, all he did was fumble around while doing his best to defend against Behemoth with spells. It was like he was relying on some third party to do the real work. Sure, Behemoth was taking damage every time he broke one of the walls, but that was trivial. It was unlikely that the undead was stupid enough to think that he could take down Behemoth with that alone.

His attempt to damage Behemoth bit-by-bit was probably a ploy to help the humans who he's expecting to come here later...brings tears to my eyes really. Behemoth's got far more health than you think, you know? Won't your mana run out first?

Another wall was smashed and he can see the next one behind it.

Decem sighed.

Continuing with this farce any longer would be tiresome.

Maybe that was his aim all along. To make me just leave them alone because it felt tiresome—how do I quickly deal with him?

He already understood that it was not wise to deal with those walls one by one, but Behemoth unfortunately didn't have any special skills. If he wanted to ignore the walls, the only other choice was to walk around them. If he did that though, the enemy would just make another wall.

It would end up being a game of cat and mouse.

Decem could control and order elementals stronger than him. Generally, it would be impossible to summon or control those stronger than yourself, but due to one of the jobs Decem learned, he could ignore that restriction. However, it came with the price that his mana would be gradually consumed while the summon was fighting.

It was not like he had to concentrate while using Behemoth, so Decem could use magic at the same time. Although, doing that would reduce the time he could keep Behemoth active.

It can't be helped. Should I just use an attack spell? Behemoth and Me. He shouldn't have any leeway to create new walls while taking on both of our attacks.

Decem could use Tenth-Tier magic.

A realm that the magic casters of this world could never reach even with all of their efforts—a tier only allowed for the chosen few.

That said, he could only barely use it because he had specialized in summoning. He was certainly not good at it, though it should be enough to deal with something like that undead easily. But—was it fine to use his precious mana like that? He hesitated, wondering if he should save it for Behemoth instead.

I have to somehow make that undead understand that humans can't do anything to me. That would probably make him stop trying to buy time...

He already said as much, but it didn't look like the other side believed him.

No, even he could understand that it was only natural that they wouldn't believe him.

One does not simply believe the enemy's words, but it's not like Decem was lying either. No one was able to beat Behemoth till now, even the ancient dragons weren't a match. Though they used Second-Tier magic to strengthen their bodies, they were still beaten into a pulp by Behemoth in the end.

Even Decem himself would inevitably die if he turned Behemoth into his opponent.

His father was probably the only one who could defeat Behemoth, but he was already dead. That meant that there was no one left who could.

He's probably thinking that he can win if I exhaust my mana, but that's wrong too...

The undead was likely counting on taking down a magic caster whose mana was exhausted easily. That was probably a prediction made from his own experience as a magic caster.

Decem deigned to recognize that a part of its reasoning was correct.

If Decem—someone who specialized in summoning—used up all of his mana and was unable to use Behemoth anymore, his battle strength would drastically drop. However, that didn't mean that he himself was weak. As someone who stood at the pinnacle of druids, his body was stronger than most living beings.

The brittle human body would split into two with just a single blow from his fist. If he kicked someone who wore armor, it would leave a footprint on it while turning the soft meat inside into pulp from the impact.

He was confident that he could wipe out a human army of thousands, nay, tens of thousands with just his bodily strength alone.

Yet, if he was asked if it was alright to exhaust his mana, he couldn't be so sure.

He was a bit uneasy about it as he entrusted most of his battles to Behemoth till now. Killing a few thousand soldiers would mean that he would need to swing

his fists thousands of times as well. He wouldn't know if his stamina would hold unless he tried, and most of all—

To fight directly by myself—to do an act as barbaric as dirtying this body with human blood is unthinkable.

As someone proud of his nature as an elemental user, to swing a weapon at his opponent personally was nothing but savagery to him. He wanted to avoid that kind of battle at all costs.

What should he do then?

I already consumed a lot of mana. I can still fight but...that doesn't mean I can do it for long using Behemoth. I will have to kill humans while keeping the grandchildren bound with magic. Taking that into account, I really don't have much leeway with my mana.

He couldn't spend any more mana on that undead.

Should I just ignore him and leave with the grandchildren? But he will probably just be summoned again...

Then they would end up going through a similar fight again.

That's not the way he wanted to do this at all.

He wanted to break their will by showing them who was the stronger one. He wanted to win the battle here and imprint on them that he was their superior.

Those two would continue to rebel against him if he didn't do that.

So that undead had to be destroyed completely.

It all comes back to this, but how should I eliminate him?

All of his opponents till now were no more than brittle branches that broke with a single punch from Behemoth. He never imagined a battle where he had to chase after the opponent who scurried here and there, trying to stall for time.

Hnnn—this was a good experience. I should practice by killing those escaping worms as well the next time around. First, I should deal with—that.

Decem glared at the wall standing in Behemoth's way. Or, to be more precise, he was staring at the undead behind it.

As I thought, there's no way around it. I should quickly kill him even if I have to use a large amount of mana. It's extremely, yes, extremely inelegant that an elemental user like me has to use attack magic but...it can't be helped. I don't want to fight physically so let's just bear with it.

After resolving himself to it, Decem selected a spell and activated it.

[Shining Burst].

The Seventh-Tier spell caused an eruption of heat and light which manifested

like the sun. The wall made of bones was blown away the instant the hemisphere of white light touched it, but the walls behind it stood undamaged.

I see, so even a wide-area spell can't break through the inner walls.

It would have been better for him if all the walls were dealt with at once, but finding out one of its characteristics was good enough. He would just have to choose a different spell next time with that information in mind.

Even wide-area spells differed slightly; some scattered and some exploded, while others radiated outwards.

Behemoth's huge right fist of stone smashed through another wall and without a pause, his left fist also brought the last wall down. He finally caught the sight of the undead who looked flustered.

He will just make another wall, won't he?

Then all he had to do was cast a more suitable spell based on the now known information.

But what happened next was unexpected.

The undead started to walk away in an attempt to create some distance from Behemoth, and took an item out from under his robe. It was probably another scroll.

The Elves used the bark from a special kind of tree to make scrolls and could only inscribe druid spells up to the third tier on them. That undead's magic was not druidic, so Decem thought that was probably how scrolls looked for spells from a different system of magic.

A low-tier spell? Is he mocking me? Does he think he can defend with just that? ...Or do the scrolls he uses contain higher-tier spells? ...But when did he even get them? A special type of summon?

The undead burned the scroll, activating the spell stored.

"Wha!?"

A dense fog spread out with the undead at its center, covering Decem's entire field of vision, reducing his visibility to only a few meters. The fog was so milky thick that he could only look ahead by maybe five meters at most.

More irritating magic from his opponent.

He was about to cast an attack spell, but it wouldn't be effective unless he had a clear line of sight; It was the same for wide-area magic. That undead used the scroll while walking, so he should be moving right now. It was possible that the target was not in range even if he attacked the spot he last saw him.

Decem commanded Behemoth to search for the undead but realized that its

movement was dull.

Behemoth's senses relied on its eyes, so it couldn't find the enemy because of the fog.

If that's how it is going to be, Decem thought. He cast the Fourth-Tier spell, [Tremor Sense].

This spell allowed him to sense even the smallest amount of tremors, allowing him to find his opponent's position. It was more effective on land but a floor should work as well. But—

—What? He is nowhere around, you say?

[Tremor Sense] told him that the two grandchildren were still here even though he couldn't see them through the fog. The tremors were probably caused by them changing their postures. It was hard to think that the undead would escape by teleportation, thus leaving them behind. It was even harder to believe that the summon was canceled. Then, what happened? Decem soon stumbled upon the reason.

He is not touching the floor! He is floating in the air!

He didn't realize it because the enemy previously only used his legs to run when he tried to escape, but he had to be floating through some means.

[Tremor Sense] could sense even the most trivial of vibrations from the floor, but its range did not extend to air.

The undead was doing a splendid job at getting on his nerves.

"Such attempts at stalling for time are meaningless! You irritating mook!"

This was starting to get really unpleasant. Maybe he should just call the humans over and wipe them out together, it would probably be quicker than this.

This weakling! He would have been dead already if we had been fighting outside!

He couldn't immediately think of a way to drag the children and the undead outside. He could blast the wall and push them outside, but he doubted that it would go as expected.

Decem hurled an order at the Behemoth—who was stumbling aimlessly—and made him stand by his side.

He was not sure about the guy's movements inside the fog, but it was possible that the undead was targeting him. That wasn't something he had to worry about as he wouldn't die in a single hit, but he didn't really want his blood spilled again by such a lowly being.

Time slowly passed by as he tried to sense the enemy's movements. It hadn't been that long since, but the sensation of his mana gradually going down made

him feel like time flowed slower than usual.

—I can't waste any more time!

He would just blow the fog away. Decem tried to remember the spells he hadn't used for a long time. As Behemoth had mowed down all of his enemies up till this point, there were a lot of spells he hadn't used after learning them. He knew at least one spell that could blow this fog away.

He chose a Ninth-Tier spell—[Tempest].

A storm started rampaging, clearing the fog in an instant. However, the fierce rain that came along with it obscured their vision again. The swirling winds were ferocious, strong enough that even Decem had to spend his full effort just to stay put. It was extremely difficult to move amidst this.

As expected, only Behemoth with its huge body could withstand the raging winds enough to move around even though its speed would go down.

That guy shouldn't be able to move in the middle of this storm either.

Nothing was visible inside this downpour, even Behemoth couldn't find that undead amidst this. But, it was different for Decem. [Tremor Sense] would pick up the vibrations caused by all of the raindrops falling on the floor, so he couldn't discern between them and the steps made by some entity even if they walked around him. On the contrary, he could sense the spots where the tremors from raindrops were weaker. Inside the image of the flat topography this room made inside his head, he found two such spots where the rain was being obstructed. One was the place where his grandchildren stood, the other one was naturally the undead's location.

—he is moving?

This fierce rain was one in which he couldn't even see before him. Even Behemoth, with all the strength its huge body provided, could barely move around in the ferocious winds.

Then, how was that undead moving inside this storm? He should have been caught by the winds even if he tried to fly.

Decem was only puzzled for a moment. He immediately dispelled [Tempest].

The rain and the winds borne of magic disappeared like they weren't there in the first place, but the wet floor and his soaked clothes proved that it hadn't been an illusion.

Decem swiped away the wet hair that was stuck to his face and saw a wall standing between him and the undead's location. The undead probably made it when the spell was dispelled.

“Cut it out, you bastard!!” Decem shouted angrily. “What was that about fighting fairly?! Sneaking behind one wall after another! Such cowardice!!”

“—isn’t it normal to use tactics in a battle? Please don’t ask me such obvious things. I have some questions as well that I would like for you to answer.”

The undead spoke from behind the wall.

He should have ignored it, considering his mana was vanishing by the second, but it sparked his curiosity. That undead’s words should contain the ideations of those twins—and by relation, their parents—behind them. He should listen.

“...What are they?”

“Is it fine to leave the humans alone? It had been some time since we started fighting here. Maybe the Elves below are being massacred right now, you know?”

He was stunned at the somewhat unexpected question, but decided to give an honest answer.

He momentarily thought about canceling Behemoth’s combat form, but then it would take some time if he wanted to return Behemoth to its present form again. We were talking about that despicable undead here. Even if they were in the middle of a conversation, he would surely come attacking if he saw a chance. A single hit would be far from fatal, but he wanted to avoid taking one head-on. So Decem decided to continue maintaining Behemoth in combat form even though it would continue to consume his mana.

“From a certain point of view, it’s probably better to save them considering that they could awaken their blood in the later generations like those two, but there are Elves elsewhere too. Plus, I have more expectations for those who could escape by themselves. In a gist, there is no need to save those who are weak enough to get killed by something like humans.”

“Onto the next question then. I heard there is a hidden treasure of the Elves?”

“A hidden treasure of the Elves? Are they talking about me? Or is it about this thing here?”

“... By ‘this thing,’ you mean Primal Earth Elemental?”

“Primal Earth Elemental?”

“Of all things, that’s what caught your attention? A Primal Earth Elemental is what you’ve summoned, right? Or is it a different race...an elemental with a different name? Do you call it by a different name?”

Even though it was fine if the lowly worm died in ignorance, Decem was irritated that he thought Behemoth was just a simple earth elemental or something from a similar race. Considering he also had to educate his grandkids

correctly, he had to correct the enemy's misunderstanding here.

"That's Behemoth. The Elemental Guardian of the Land, Behemoth."

"Behemoth? So I didn't mishear it...Elemental Guardian of the Land? Not the Great Magic Beast of the Continent? The raid boss? The Behemoth I knew looked a lot different...Who was the one that named it first? You?"

"Someone else, but—"

"—Then, who?"

The questioning tone felt a bit forceful. Why was he interested in that of all things? What's this Great Magic Beast of the Continent? He felt like he heard the term raid boss (a strong enemy that required a party to defeat) though... This guy—or his grandchildren to be more accurate; maybe they knew some things not even he knew about. It would be better to not answer the undead's questions anymore.

"...How about taking down that wall if you want me to answer? Isn't it rude to talk without even being able to see each others' faces?"

"Then it's fine if you don't answer. I only asked that question out of intellectual curiosity."

Was it the undead who wanted the information, or was it the grandchildren who somehow got their hands on some information and wanted to know more? The two kids who were drenched from the rain had blank expressions so Decem couldn't read anything from them.

"And another question—"

"That's enough. There's no longer any reason for me to continue talking with you."

Feeling anxious, Decem put strength in the stare he was directing at the twins. The questions were completely different from what he was expecting them to be about and he couldn't expend any more mana. There's no need to talk anymore.

"That's the end of our conversation."

Suddenly, the wall disappeared.

He was stunned at the unexpected development, just as he was about to use [Green Chain] on the twins. He hesitated for a moment about who he should target.

"—this should probably be your limit. Anyhow, your mana should be reduced by a lot at least."

"...what?"

Decem was confused by the undead's extremely cold voice.

Why could he sense complete calm from him?

An incompetent undead who could do nothing but stall for time—

He should just command Behemoth to crush him into a pulp—

Decem turned his gaze towards the stairs behind the undead. He thought that maybe this attitude was because he had achieved his goal to stall for the arrival of the humans, but he couldn't see anyone coming up the stairs. Even if he concentrated on listening, he couldn't hear any human footsteps—or any other footsteps for that matter.

He didn't know what the undead thought of his actions just now, but the undead started speaking again.

"I said your mana should mostly be gone by now. How much longer can you maintain Pri—Behemoth? Probably a few more minutes at least I think."

"Ah, so that's what this is about. You thought that you could win against me without my mana. Sure, I wasn't able to avoid your punch at the start, but that's because you were summoned suddenly. I could have easily avoided it if I knew you were going to appear."

"–I know."

The voice was as cold as it was before. Decem took a gulp unconsciously.

Why does he behave like that?

Strange.

Why was he getting pressured by such a weak undead?

He, whose blood came from the one who dominated the world in the past.

He, who stood at the pinnacle of the Elves as the current strongest Elf.

Decem gritted his teeth and suppressed the shameful emotions welling up inside his heart.

"I see it now!" he shouted with a thunderous voice. "You made me bleed with your fist so you're thinking that you can win in a physical melee. That punch barely did any damage to me you see!"

"I know that too."

Upon receiving the undead's calm response to his anger-fueled shout, Decem felt an unpleasantness that couldn't be put in words.

Maybe he was—

Just for a moment, an impossible thought flitted across his mind.

Then why?

Why did he fight like that?

This was a bluff.

The enemy was trying to deceive him by acting calm.

There's no way it could be anything else.

"Behemoth!" He wasn't sure if that was an angry shout or a scared shriek. "—Crush him!!"

"Let's start then".

Decem understood the reason behind the undead's calmness the very next moment.

"[Triplet Maximize Magic - Cacophonous Burst]—Release"

There was an explosion of sound waves at first, then a pair of angel wings appeared next.

A storm of shockwaves hit Behemoth who stood between Decem and the undead as a rain of light rivaling the downpour from before pierced its body. The Elemental Guardian of the Land's health was being blown away by the second. It didn't bleed or lose parts of its body like a living being, but Decem, as its master, knew Behemoth was standing on its last legs.

Confusion.

Nothing but confusion.

Behemoth was the greatest elemental. No one was on par with it. Even though it received damage in fights until now, they were no more than a few scratches considering its enormous health.

And that—

Like this—

Not once was its health reduced to the verge of death like this.

"N-no way..."

"Well now. I didn't expect that even six hits weren't enough to take it down even though I triggered its weakness. Would it have been different if I was more specialized in offensive magic?"

Just like before, Decem couldn't feel a single emotion from the undead's calm voice. It was like he was a completely different person from the undead before.

W-what the hell is even happening?

The confusion welling up in his heart calmed down for a bit and in its place, fear ran through his body.

The fleeting thought from before loomed larger now.

That, perhaps, this undead was stronger than him.

"No! Behemoth! Protect—"

Me—Behemoth, upon sensing his thoughts, moved to cover Decem from the undead's sight and brought down its right fist on the enemy.

"I did it!! —nn? What!?"

Behemoth followed with a punch from his left hand, meaning that undead wasn't killed in a single hit.

Even though he had received two hits face-on, he saw that the undead still brazenly stood on the other side.

He wasn't crushed.

Although it had crushed every enemy until now, that undead stood there like it was nothing.

"[Triplet Maximize Magic - Cacophonous Burst]."

In front of Decem's eyes, Behemoth—the invincible great elemental— turned into a large pile of dirt.

He was assaulted by a great sense of—

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—in that instant.

Something that was inside him had now disappeared without a trace, leaving a gaping hole behind.

"So it's overkill...but considering you might have some skills up your sleeves, I don't think I made a wrong choice. What do you think?"

"—Hiyeee!"

Impossible.

The absolutely invincible elemental, his own shadow. It's impossible for Behemoth to have lost.

But it's a fact that it was not standing in front of him right now.

Then what should he do?

What action should he take?

Who the hell was the undead before him—.

"You don't have to be so scared—[Reality Slash]."

He was assaulted by a flood of pain.

The kind of pain he never experienced till now.

"AA, AAAaaaa." Looking down, he saw that his rain-drenched clothes were now soaked red.

"Hurtss, It hurtssss!!"

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

That was the only thing echoing inside his head.

"I understand the feeling very well. If not for this body, I would have become hysterical from just a single one of those hits before. Well then, I have a proposal. Surrender. I will not cause you any more pain if you do that, and will guarantee your safety afterward."

"Ah, ah, Aah, it hur...r-really?"

With tears welling up from the pain, Decem posed the question to the two grandchildren.

The two looked flustered for a moment, and then the granddaughter replied with "yes, really."

"Now we have my masters' permission as well. Start removing your gear. Don't fear. I will return them back after confirming if there's anything dangerous with them. Really. I am not lying at all. I will swear it in the names of my masters. Trust me."

The undead spoke with a sincere and gentle voice. Decem felt like believing him.

It hurts.

[Mercy of Shorea Robusta] was slowly healing the wound, but it didn't take away the pain from the deep, deep wound.

Just for a moment, he felt like surrendering if it could take away this pain. But—he still had some pride left.

As someone who reigned over this country for a long time as its king, he was reluctant to plead for his life from people far younger than himself, even if they were his grandchildren.

It hurts.

He had no mana left. No, there was some, but he couldn't see himself winning against this undead with the remaining amount.

Should he attempt to settle this in a melee?

No, first of all, he was not confident in himself right now. He would probably die first if he were to take multiple hits from the undead's spells as strong as the one from before.

It hurts.

Decem turned his gaze behind the undead—towards the stairs.

There's no one there.

In that case—.

He should run. That's all he could do.

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

It hurts.

Even so, Decem started to run.

The blood he left behind was a sign of his declining health.

The fear of death welled up in his heart. Even though he had equipped magic items that resisted fear, it couldn't eliminate what was born from inside him.

That was why—because he was being urged onward by his fear—his body followed exactly what his mind demanded of it. He kicked the floor with a speed he had never reached until now.

His vision of his surroundings blurred as he picked up speed, instantly reducing the distance between him and the undead.

"Stop! Or I will kill you!"

He ignored the undead's warning as he passed by him, hearing a tongue click and then a spell being cast.

"[Time Stop]."

He expected more pain from the spell but didn't feel any. No, maybe there was. Perhaps the pain from his deep wound had taken a turn for the worse from him running, to the point where he couldn't even notice any other source of pain even if there was such a thing.

So—Decem continued to run. The stairs were very close.

The pain in his chest was surprisingly strong, but there was no hesitation in his legs.

"Aura!"

It seemed like the undead chanted another spell, but once again, this spell didn't affect him either.

Then, all he had to do was run.

He reached the stairs—and the floor under his feet exploded. Three times at that.

His body flew in the air for just a moment, but by wringing the utmost effort out of his body, he managed to keep his posture and continued to flee without reducing his speed even a bit. He didn't feel much pain from his legs. Or rather,

he couldn't really feel anything due to the pain in his chest and the overwhelming fear he felt.

He felt like the undead was saying something behind him, but he didn't have the composure to hear it.

Decem ran like he was flying over the stairs.

He couldn't hear anyone chasing him from behind. The moment his tension melted a bit, a fierce pain ran through his legs.

Decem nearly cried out by instinct, but suppressed it in a panic. It would be extremely bad to make a loud sound right now.

Looking down at his legs, he found them in shreds, probably due to the explosion before.

Acknowledging the wounds made his pain that much stronger.

Decem looked back the way he ran and saw the trail of blood his escape had made. Even if they were not good at tracking, they could probably follow after him very easily.

It hurts.

He didn't want to run anymore.

But, he was sure there would be more pain waiting for him if he didn't.

And most of all—he didn't want to die.

With his mind filled with that single conviction, Decem bore the pain and willed his legs into motion.

Why do I have to do something like this? Why won't my grandchildren listen to me?!

He couldn't understand at all.

Why won't they cooperate for the sake of the Elven race?

Damn it all!

Shouting silently inside his heart—because he was scared of giving his location away by his voice—Decem spat profanities, wiping his tears away as he ran.

♦ ♦ ♦

Ainz called for Decem's surrender in the gentlest voice he could muster. Maybe because he couldn't use that strange teleportation technique anymore or maybe because Ainz had succeeded in his attempt to guide the guy's thoughts down a certain path by pushing him to the edge, it looked like he would accept his proposal.

Finally, Ainz smiled scornfully in his heart.

Of course, the proposal was a complete lie. He had no intention of guaranteeing the Elf King's safety. He would be dealt with the moment he took off his equipment.

The guy probably wouldn't target the twins anymore with his will broken, but [Death] was the more surefire way.

Yet, he felt a fire burning in Decem's eyes the very next moment.

"Nn?"

Decem suddenly broke into a sprint. Straight towards Ainz at that.

"Tch! Melee!? In that case—I don't mind at all!"

Ainz hid his smile from his face and instead adopted a voice of surprise and fear.

As an Arcane-type magic caster, Ainz hated fighting in close quarters so it could be said that the opponent was treading on his weakness. However, the fact that the guy still wanted to fight was a welcome fact for Ainz. He would now be able to kill Decem for sure in return for some of his HP. But, what happened next really surprised Ainz, so much so that it felt like even his face that couldn't make expressions looked surprised.

Decem's trajectory was just a bit off from Ainz, and it looked like he didn't intend to reduce his speed either.

Ainz immediately realized that his predictions were off.

—Damn it! He is making a break for it!

This made his opinions of Decem go up by a level—or maybe not, but it was raised by at least a little. The most troublesome scenario for Ainz was the enemy giving his all to escape. Ainz would do the same as Decem in a situation like this, although far sooner, before things would reach this point.

It was because he understood this, that Ainz put many countermeasures in place to prevent the opponent from escaping through magical means like the way he came in. However, he didn't prepare much against him escaping by physical means. There hadn't been enough time to prepare and it had been difficult to set up the countermeasures in place while trying to hide his true strength.

"Stop! Or I will kill you!"

He shouted a warning but didn't really expect the guy to stop. Plus, it's not like he wouldn't kill him even if he did stop running. Ainz immediately started thinking of the next card to play.

The opponent could just jump over any walls he made. They would instead

obstruct him from seeing the guy's escape, making it more difficult to deal with him.

Psychic magic could end this in a single blow, but it's doubtful whether it would work on Decem who was expected to be over level 70. Skills or items to resist mind control were very easy to obtain in YGGDRASIL. It was hard to prepare against every type of mind control magic but he probably had countermeasures against at least some.

Jircniv had a magic item against being affected by mind control, so to think that Decem wouldn't have any would be idiotic. Personally, he wanted to kill the guy with instant death magic, but considering that he was protected by [Mercy of Shorea Robusta], it was meaningless.

So, he finally chose [Time stop]. This could be resisted as well if he had measures against it, but it should be harder to deal with unless he used a magic item.

"[Time Stop]!"

He didn't stop.

Decem didn't stop.

Ainz didn't click his tongue. He had already thought about this possibility in a corner of his mind. In this case, he only needed to borrow the help of others.

He immediately shouted a command.

"Aura!"

"Yes!"

Aura nocked an arrow and—

"[Shadow-Sewing Arrow]."

—shot an arrow that pierced Decem's shadow, but that too failed at stopping Decem even for a moment. He managed to reach the stairs. Luckily, Ainz made the minimum amount of preparations while he was hiding behind the [Walls of Skeleton] from before.

[Explode Mine] activated under Decem's feet.

"It's useless. At your feet—"

Decem ignored him and fled. He could hear footsteps going down the stairs, gradually turning faint.

"—did he realize I was bluffing? Or was he just not in the mood to listen to anything? He was not knowledgeable enough to use piercing magic against wall-type magic, so I ended up underestimating him."

He tried to stop him with a bluff, but it wasn't effective.

Decem was a druid. Though from a different system, as a magic caster, it was entirely possible that he saw through Ainz's magical traps. Generally, one couldn't cast multiple instances of the same spell at the same time. It's just like how one wouldn't be able to amass a lot of monsters by summoning them repeatedly.

"Sorry for letting him escape!"

Upon hearing Aura's apology, Ainz turned his gaze from the stairs that Decem had disappeared under to her.

"No... No, you are right...that skill was a poor choice, Aura. You saw that he had countermeasures against time stop and instant death during that fight. You should have also assumed that he had some countermeasures against crowd control." Ainz lifted a hand to stop Aura, who was trying to apologize again. "But, I am also at fault for not warning you about it. In fact, I didn't expect him to have measures for crowd control either. That aside...what do you think we should do now?"

"I will chase and kill him."

"Wait!"

Ainz stopped Aura, who was on the verge of charging out.

Considering Decem was probably a druid above level 70, it was highly likely that Ainz couldn't overtake him with his speed. Only Aura and Mare could do that. However, in that case, Ainz—who had exhausted a fair bit of mana—would be left alone.

I should get some reinforcements from Nazarick through a [*Gate*]*—no, there's not enough time. First, I have to decide if I want to let him escape this time or kill him here.*

Even with most of his mana exhausted, Decem's physical capabilities were comparatively high. Ainz couldn't win in a melee where he wouldn't be able to use his magic. Of course, that's assuming he didn't use [Perfect Warrior].

Without her beasts, it's possible that Aura may not be able to deal with him if he were to bring out some trump card he might be still holding on to. Maybe I should summon an undead...No, what if he summoned another Primal Earth Elemental? No, no, no...that should be impossible.

It would be broken if one could just summon elementals stronger than them multiple times. Even Ainz, who specialized in necromancy, couldn't do that. That said, what was "impossible" to Ainz was ultimately according to YGGDRASIL's standards and it was entirely possible that those rules didn't apply to this world.

Even though his game knowledge had been applicable till now, Decem's command of that elemental was impossible by the game's logic. In that case—

"—Mare!"

"Y-yes"

"It's probably going to be dangerous, but you will have to kill that Decem by your strength alone. You are wearing different gear than usual so don't be careless. If you feel like you can't win, conserve your mana and stall for time." Ainz wanted to give him more directions, but he couldn't waste any more time.

"Go!"

"Yes!"

Mare gave an unusually energetic reply and started racing down the stairs, following after Decem. He was fast as Ainz had expected, his steps already becoming fainter by the second.

Seeing him run alone, Ainz wanted to summon an undead to go after Mare as support, but decided to hold it back so that they could use it as a shield if there was an emergency. In any case, [Lopsided Duel] was still active. Maybe he could use the undead to quickly deal with him if he had to fight that king again.

"—Aura! You will be guarding me. Let's go through the treasury as quickly as possible and get everything. We will then regroup with Mare right after!"

"Okay!"

3

The frontline's unified command center had always been noisy, but it was even more so with the war situation finally changing. It would probably continue to be bustling even after they'd won this war, at least until the civil officials arrived to oversee the occupation.

Right now, the strategists were compiling the information carried by messengers from different places, going over each piece and taking great pains to consolidate them into a comprehensive battle map. They still had the calculations for the casualties to do as well as the management of the prisoners of war. Other miscellaneous tasks like dealing with the dead bodies were postponed for later as they were in the middle of fighting right now.

Anyhow, only accurate information—without any falsehood—reached General Valerian Ein Obinie.

That's why he felt relief from the bottom of his heart when he received the news that he was waiting for.

"Your Excellency. We finally broke through those Elven defensive lines. With this, the enemy's counterattacks were reduced by 70%...we feel like they were weakened by too much but that can be attributed to the absence of strong people in the enemy forces. Still, the remaining enemies have escaped into the city, waiting to lay ambushes in different places. How should we proceed?"

"Avoid unnecessary casualties. The guerillas who barricaded themselves in weren't too much of a threat, but those who are roaming around the city going on a rampage are to be feared. Expand the area under our control, suppress them and force those Elves outside—into the waiting hands of our encircling siege. Avoid fighting indoors. Don't forget to include strong individuals in the squads deployed to fight inside the city."

“Understood. I will relay the instructions immediately.”

“The Elves fighting against the siege will probably fight as fierce as cornered, dying animals. Make sure to warn everyone again to be on their guard.”

“Understood.”

“—It looks like our path lies open, but have we received any counterattack from the castle?”

“Nothing. It continues to stay silent.”

That would have usually made Valerian’s expression far grimmer.

He doubted the castle was empty. It was highly likely that it was being protected by the Elven elites. Also, there was no doubt that the desperate Elven soldiers were escaping to the castle and most of all, there was still the existence of the Elf King.

The death of the Holocaust Scripture’s vice leader at the hands of the elemental commanded by the Elf King was still fresh in their minds. He might not have reached the realm of heroes, but was still strong enough to have stood on its cusp, yet he was killed just like that.

According to the records in the Theocracy, even a Holocaust Scripture—made up of hero class members—a hundred years ago was nearly eliminated by the Elf King’s strength. He didn’t know what that operation was about, but seeing that it had succeeded, that at least meant that the Elf King was not infallible. Still, dealing with him would have been too heavy a burden for Valerian’s troops and would be the greatest mountain they have to cross yet in this war.

But—they have a trump card here now.

“Just to make sure, are you certain that we can advance there directly?”

“Yes. It’s possible.”

Hearing the confidence in the strategist’s answer, Valerian stood from his chair.

“In that case...we can probably consider our preliminary goal completed...Everyone, we’ve weathered through some tough times. Tell everyone to halt after we’ve surrounded the royal castle and continue observing it from afar. Ask them to put their efforts in other areas. I will go over to that person to pass on the information personally.”

Valerian exited his tent alone and headed to a different tent. This tent’s owner didn’t like others’ company much. It would be bad if this person was displeased.

He called from outside the tent.

“Excuse me, is it alright for me to come in?”

“Please.”

He received an immediate reply.

Valerian took a single deep breath before he entered.

She was certainly not a dangerous person. He had exchanged light greetings with her on her arrival and felt that she was a rational person. However, when faced with a person from the Black Scripture, someone who stood in the realm of heroes—or someone who exceeded the realm of humans—even Valerian needed a certain amount of resolve. Even though he knew that they wouldn’t attack him, he required the kind of mental state that was necessary if one were to face a giant carnivore before them.

And there was one more thing.

Even among the heroes, the one inside this tent was kind of special for the Theocracy.

Different humanoid races could produce children between them but that kind of thought was taboo in the Theocracy.

For the Theocracy, which thought that only humans should flourish, every other race was an enemy even if they were humanoids.

That said, that policy was comparatively new and had only been practiced for a century plus a few decades. Before that, the Theocracy also took the other humanoid races into consideration, the policy being that they should join hands together and fight against the other races.

The person inside this tent was considered one of the reasons for that change.

She was considered the Theocracy’s strongest, and her lifespan was extremely long. She was also supposedly the apprentice of the rumored person known as the guardian deity of their nation. That was all Valerian knew.

Among such vague information, there were also a few things that he knew to be true.

One was that she was not someone even a general like him could be rude to. Of course, he had never even thought of looking down at the apex of the natural order.

He rolled the cloth covering the entrance aside and entered, whereupon he saw a simple chair, a bed, and a table with a helmet on top of it. The tent was not too different from the others around it, but the furniture inside was comparatively well made. These were brought over from the Theocracy using [Teleportation], even his—a general’s—tent didn’t have such nice things.

He found her jumping in the middle of the decor, wearing dazzling armor.

“Did something happen?”

Perhaps she was doing something Valerian wasn’t knowledgeable on. For example, a special type of ritual.

“Nn? No, it was nothing special. I just don’t feel calm unless I move my body around”

“Undoubtedly so.”

She continued to jump for a few more seconds and finally stopped.

“You don’t need to be so polite. You are my superior in a sense after all.”

Though she said that, it didn’t feel like she intended to change her own tone or the air of superiority that hung around her.

“No, I certainly cannot acquiesce to such a request, not to the Theocracy’s strongest force and the guardian deity’s apprentice.”

“Too stiff…Well, I won’t stop you if you want to be like that. That aside, seeing that you are here, can I assume it’s about that?”

“Yes. Only the castle’s left now, but we think the remaining forces are concentrating in the castle at the present, so…”

“I will deal with them too, but I am only aiming for one person so don’t expect me to be thorough in wiping them out.”

“Understood. Please leave them to us.”

The woman called Zesshi Zetsumei slowly changed her expression.

Valerian, who saw the smile on her face, cast his eyes down.

It’s not like she was pointing killing intent at him. He understood that. Even so, he couldn’t help but feel afraid.

“Ah, sorry about that…well, can you hear me out a bit?”

“Yes. If you are fine with me.”

“Un. Honestly speaking, you could say that I don’t really hate him, because he never harmed me directly. You could also say that he didn’t do anything fatherly, but from his point of view that’s unreasonable to ask of him. It’s entirely possible that he didn’t even know about my existence after all…It was my mother who had a grudge against him. So, you could say that my feelings in this matter are just what my mother instilled into me.”

How should he answer her? Should he agree or deny? First of all, did she really say that she was the Elf King’s daughter? Then, who in the world was her mother? Question after question flitted across his mind.

She ignored Valerian, who couldn’t answer from confusion, and continued with her speech.

He understood it now.

This was just her talking to herself. She didn't expect an answer.

"Then I should be directing my hatred at my mother, right? To the one who gave me such troublesome emotions, but she is already dead so I can't take it out on her. Maybe that's why I am directing this hatred at my father as a replacement. If I really want to clear my hatred...I should be directing it at the things my mother loved, right?"

The mood of the conversation changed.

Valerian tried to read her expression.

She was still smiling. Nothing's changed.

But—was that smile real?

He gulped unconsciously.

He was afraid that his answer could become the trigger that would cause the Theocracy's destruction.

She probably felt his tension, as her smile turned bitter.

"...ah, I did it again. Sorry. Did I scare you? I was not saying that I would make the Theocracy the target of my hatred, because...all things considered I do love the Theocracy."

"I-is that so? That's great."

He couldn't give her a good reply, but relief spread inside Valerian.

"But...I don't know why. I just wonder if I can really feel free after I clear this hatred that my mother burned into me. I feel a little shy talking about things like this. This is probably what they call a moody phase."

"I see."

"If it were one of my acquaintances, they would be joking about my age right about now."

"Sorry for not being attentive enough."

She continued, unbothered by Valerian's bow.

"I wonder what my mother felt."

"Eh?"

"...The weak can only be trampled upon, so become strong. The sentiment certainly isn't wrong. I doubt if there was any need to train a child so strictly, but then again, it's likely that I wasn't the only one who was trained to near death during their childhood. There could be someone who is receiving stricter training than me to become stronger. With that in mind, I am just being a spoiled child, am I not?"

"About that...It's hard to say for sure, I think, but how should I put it..."

Agreement or denial. Valerian, who was focused on thinking about which answer would be less likely to displease her, ended up giving her a nonsensical response.

Probably realizing what Valerian was going through, she laughed again—though it was an honest laugh this time.

"Maybe I should go through the old records after everything's done. There might be things the past me didn't notice. Maybe there are some things that couldn't be understood except from a third party's perspective. Anyhow...she should have probably left something behind. What did she really feel about me? ...Well then, shall we go?"

♦ ♦ ♦

"Huff. Huff. Huff—"

Considering Decem's physical capabilities, sprinting such a short distance at his full speed shouldn't have him wheezing. Yet, he was completely out of breath. It must be the fear. The fear that was welling up from inside him was so strong it was physically affecting his body.

He tried to listen to his rear, to see if anyone was chasing him.

Nothing.

No one was coming after him.

Did he manage to escape?

No—Decem shook his head silently.

He couldn't be careless.

He should not cling to his pride as the strongest Elf anymore. He should run away.

Defeat isn't the end of everything. It's not like there were no Elves left outside this forest. He could just travel to a place far away and rebuild his kingdom. He was confident enough in his own strength that he would be able to do that—probably.

I won't make the same mistake next time.

Be it grandchildren or great-grandchildren—he now had the proof that even later generations could awaken their blood. He would just have to proceed wisely from now.

Yeah, that's right. This is neither a mistake nor a defeat. Just something that can be a good experience for me. I won't waste the experience that I have gained. I am not such an idiot. Only idiots repeat their mistakes!

That's right.

First, he would make his children have progeny with the Dark Elves…or should he do it with the Dark Elves himself?

Anyhow, there's no time. Should I just escape as quickly as possible? Or…maybe I should carry some food with me.

Decem continued to think while running.

His teleportation was limited to teleporting to the elemental he was linked with. As he couldn't use it anymore with Behemoth dead, he could only rely on his own legs to run away from this place. Still, he could fly, so maybe he didn't need to rely solely on his legs.

That's right, Decem had the power of magic.

Frankly speaking, even if he didn't take anything along, he should be able to manage somehow with just the gear he had on him. Plus, if he passed by a civilized area, he could just pillage what he wanted from them. These things were possible for someone as strong as Decem.

Certainly, he had just been defeated—it was vexing but he had acknowledged it—but those grandchildren's strength was an exception. They were only that strong because they had Decem's blood flowing through them, so it's unlikely there were people of similar strength at the place he would be escaping to. Still, a display of his strength could draw too much attention. That undead commanded by the grandchildren might come chasing after him if news of his whereabouts were spread.

That aside, what were those two aiming for in the first place? Were they on that floor because the treasury was there? In that case, maybe they are no longer interested in taking my life…

Perhaps he was being too optimistic. It was hard for him to believe the grandchildren's words—or to be more accurate, what they made the undead say.

"Maybe…they really are after me"

He should expect the worst-case scenario. His life depended on it after all.

In that case, I should try my best to lie low until I am as far away as possible from this area…I should also avoid using magic. I will have to carry some food with me then.

There was a druid spell that could make fruits. There was also a staff inside his

treasury that could do it six times every four hours, but Decem himself didn't learn that spell. He wasn't used to living in the forest either. Decem was confident in his ability to deal with any beasts that could attack him but he was not at all confident in his ability to collect food from the forest—including properly field dressing the slain beasts.

There is some fruit and wine inside my room. I should leave this forest with them as fast as possible, without using magic. After that, I will kill everyone I meet to stop information about me from reaching those children's ears. I can also snatch their goods at the same time. While doing that, I will run to a place as far away as possible. Oh, right. Maybe I should also carry some valuables. I remember hearing that jewels and gold coins are useful.

Decem finally reached his room, wheezing his lungs out.

There should be some women inside, but it would draw attention if he took any with him. They would also be a burden so they should probably be left behind here.

Or maybe he should take one or two along.

It was an unpleasant thing for a king like him to carry them, but they shouldn't be a burden if he did that.

—I don't mind taking along a woman who can cook. And it's unknown when I can meet an Elf again after leaving this forest. In that case, I should really take some along to make children.

Decem adjusted his breathing and wiped off the sweat induced by pain. He wanted to avoid looking unkingly before the women.

While splitting some of his attention towards the way he came from, scared that the undead would suddenly appear, Decem opened the door to his room.

"Welcome back."

A female's nonchalant voice called out to him.

Decem immediately felt angry.

To think a woman who probably scraped their heads along the ground for him until now dared to be so nonchalant! He felt like he was being mocked for suffering defeat at the hands of his grandchildren. However, that anger soon subsided the instant he saw the room's situation.

It was red.

His room was painted completely red.

It's blood.

The scent of blood was so thick that he couldn't even begin to describe it. He

probably failed to notice it outside the room because his nose had been distracted by the scent of his own blood.

The remains of the women who were supposed to be here were scattered around the room and a single chair was placed in the middle of them—likely intentional—with a woman sitting on it.

He didn't know her. She wore a splendid-looking full set of armor, carried a helmet in one hand, and held a mysterious-looking staff with three curved blades drenched in blood at the end of it in the other. He couldn't understand what method of use the creator of this weapon had in mind when they made it.

The woman didn't look like an Elf to him, but at the same time, her face had hints of Elven characteristics.

So was she an Elf? And most of all, those eyes—

"Yo—pleased to meet you, father."

The woman grinned with clear scorn.

He finally arrived at the only possible conclusion.

"I see. So that's how it is...so you are those kids' mother..."

The woman's expression went stiff for a moment before returning it to a smile immediately.

"Yes, you are right. Those kids'...mother. Those wounds—so you were defeated by them—are they so strong? Which ability of theirs made you lose? Tell me, father"

He started to open his mouth but stopped it. He didn't have time to play along with her as she was clearly stalling for time.

He immediately turned his heels, trying to get away from the room—

"—not going to let you."

"Guh!"

Pain ran through his legs, making him tumble on the floor.

Looking down, he saw that the blade that extended from the strange weapon caught his legs. It tripped him and he was being dragged back into the room by his legs.

New wounds opened on his legs and he started to bleed again, but those were trivial compared to the chest wound from that undead or the damage his legs received when he ran from them.

But—he couldn't understand.

There had been some distance between the two of them. Despite that, she immediately caught up with him and attacked his legs. It's like this woman—his

own child—was far faster than he could ever be.

He felt a strong pressure bearing down on his back.

The woman was pressing him down with her feet.

“Guhh!”

Decem couldn’t stand up.

Did this mean that she was far stronger than him? Or was it some kind of special skill?

“Was your chest wound caused by a blade? What about those on your legs? I’ve heard that you use an earth elemental, so where is that?”

She fired out questions in rapid succession. He could not feel a hint of tension in her voice.

It was true that Decem was deeply wounded. It was also true that he lost Behemoth, but that didn’t mean he was weak. He still had his physical strength, which could easily kill any living being around here in a single hit. This Decem, who had lost Behemoth and who only had his physical strength to rely on, tried to run with his full power. Even though he was dulled by the pain, there was no way that woman could catch him.

But he had to acknowledge reality.

This woman surpassed him in brute strength.

But there was still a doubt left.

He didn’t remember having a child with such high abilities. He moved his head to see the woman who was pushing down on him.

Just as he thought, he really did not know her, and her face felt a little bit off for an Elf.

“...Wh-what do you want? Why are you doing this to me?”

That was a genuine doubt from the bottom of his heart. The woman laughed out loud with scorn.

“The strong can do whatever they want to the weak. Am I wrong?”

“Guh...mm”

She was right.

That was the principle Decem had lived by till now.

“That is the morality of wild animals...but it’s a suitable ideology for savages who live in the forest without proper civilization.”

“D-did the women who had been here say that?”

“...fuhh”

The woman let out a large sigh like she was trying to expel the heat that

accumulated inside her.

And in that instant, the force pressing down on him became stronger.

“Guhh, ggahaa...”

He couldn’t breathe from the pressure.

“Why don’t you answer my previous question first?—wait, did you forget it? Are you turning senile?”

“Gogggah...”

The pressure on him gradually increased to the point where Decem could no longer bear it. He could hear the innards of his body creaking around. His mouth, opened to take in a breath, could do nothing but expel air.

“Tch,” the pressure was slightly lessened after she clicked her tongue, but not enough for him to be able to escape. Decem still had to put in all of his efforts just to take a fresh breath.

“What attack wounded you like that?”

Why, is this happening to me...From the moment I met those kids...it’s the worst...but why is this woman interested in the wounds? Doesn’t she know what her children did? They are necromancers who command various undead...no, maybe...it’s different?

To think three people, his children and grandchildren, who rivaled him—no, who surpassed him—appeared at the same time? No, maybe there’s a different reason behind it.

“I see! I thought they were my grandchildren—descendents, but if they are blood relatives, there’s another possibility! Perhaps they are my father’s...! Impossible! These are my half-siblings!?”

Wasn’t that the most logical answer to all of this?

His father was an Elven hero who was the strongest fencer.

(T/N: 軽(light)戦士(warrior) => light(weight)warrior => fencer. The light (軽) here is the light in “lightly armored,” not light as in luminescence. 軽戦士 is general japanese rpg lingo for classes like fencers, skirmishers and similar lightly armored martial classes but in Overlord Maruyama specifically uses it for fencers.)

They were called Eight Greed Kings not in praise, but in scorn, because they were stronger than anyone else. The weaklings tried to paint over their great deeds and destroy their glory through such petty acts.

Decem didn’t manage to inherit the fencing talent from that great bloodline but perhaps this woman here did.

“So? Talk soon or I will kill you, okay?”

“Aaah...ah...khah!”

Talk, I will talk, so please ease off the pressure. He wanted to shout, but he couldn't vocalize. He heard something break inside his body as a sharp pain spread through his chest. His body stiffened from the pain that felt like his innards were being gouged out as he unconsciously drew nails on the floor.

"...I never felt a single ounce of pity for my mother since then but...to think she conceived me after being raped by such a mook...yeah, I do pity her a little."

When he thought he heard her talking to herself, the pressure on the leg crushing him increased further. He could hear things inside him breaking one after another, revitalizing the pain he felt previously with every instance.

He could taste the blood welling up from his throat, but even if he wanted to let it out, he could at most make a trickle down his mouth.

It was stifling.

Stifling and painful.

Why did he have to go through this?

Even though he did nothing wrong at all.

Decem struggled with his full might. Just a single breath would be nice, but he wasn't able to free himself. His struggles were meaningless in the face of an overwhelming gap in the level of their strength.

Die.

He would die.

Not much time had passed since he has had similar thoughts, but it was stronger this time.

Scared.

He was scared.

Stifling.

It was stifli—

Why, he—

"...This is really irritating, because of this mook, I...my mother..."

Dark—

Why—

Tears welled up.

Why was she doing such cruel things to him?

"Really, really!"

He couldn't breathe.

He didn't want to die—

Someone—

Help—

–

–suddenly, his consciousness came back, but that didn't mean the pain disappeared or that he could breathe.

What.

Something happened.

"...your body swelled up? Really, how stubborn!!"

–crackcrackcrackcrackcrackcrack

The sound of all of his bones breaking at once.

Pain—

Something—

Happen—

The world darkened for Decem once again.

♦ ♦ ♦

"Just like your ideology, right? You reap what you sow. Ah, but it's a bit unfortunate. I wanted to torment you more before killing you..."

Not a twitch could be seen from her blood-related father anymore. Zesshi moved her gaze to the Elf corpses around her.

Now that she thought about it, she really didn't need to go this far. It would be a lie to say that her hatred towards her mother wasn't a factor in her killing them all. However, most of all, she didn't wish for the country she loved to do the same things this bastard—whose very existence in the same world as her made her nauseous—had done. She thought that they would be better off dead, so she sank these female elves into a sea of blood.

Those people, who optimistically thought that these elves could have achieved happiness elsewhere, probably wouldn't understand Zesshi's actions. In a similar vein, Zesshi couldn't understand those kinds of people either.

Zesshi suddenly looked at the entrance.

A dark elf girl could be seen in the gap of the still open door.

There was no doubt that she was one of "those kids" that drove the Elf King into a corner.

Upon seeing the mark of royalty in those eyes—each of a different color—Zesshi let out a small sigh.

Decem mistook Zesshi, who he had never met, for their mother. Then, this should be his grandchild—Zesshi's niece.

A little surprised at her own unexpected reluctance to kill this child, Zesshi kicked the Elf King, already dead from getting his chest caved in, towards the child with her full strength.

Ordinary people, no, not even outliers should have been able to avoid it; yet, the girl did, by just jumping aside primly.

The corpse hit the opposite wall and bloomed into a bloody flower with a loud sound.

To think that she avoided it…her physical ability should be comparatively high. That guy's wound looked like it was from a blade though…

The girl—her niece was holding a black staff, a weapon to bonk with. A glance at that guy's wound was enough to know that it was from a different weapon. He actually did say "those kids," so there should be one more at the very least. However, there were also magic items that could create blades of magic or could change themselves into blades.

She couldn't disregard the possibility that this girl was the one who wounded the Elf King.

Or maybe the other child caused the chest wound while this one smashed his legs? With her staff…or magic?

But why did this dark elf girl wound the Elf King?

No, there were many things to hate him for. Perhaps she was the same as Zesshi, inheriting her mother's hatred for the Elf King. This could be the case, especially since she looked too young to have her own reason to hate the Elf King enough to wound him so grievously.

It was also possible that she just wounded him while frolicking around, but the circumstances just now denied that possibility. Even though he was already dead, the girl avoided the body she kicked instead of trying to retrieve it.

"E-excuse me, y-you see. Where are you from onee-san?"

Very shy—a cute girl who was male fantasy made manifest. She was from a different world compared to Zesshi, such a girl asked her a question.

But a single glance was enough for her to see that the girl was different inside. The girl didn't look like she was scared by the Elf King's corpse behind her or the massacre done by Zesshi in this room.

She can still behave like that after avoiding my attack? Uwaah. It's highly likely her shyness is just an act, that just makes me more cautious…well then, what should I do?

How should she answer the opponent's question? If possible, she wanted to avoid a battle and feed her false information while taking her time to gain as much information as possible from the other side.

But that was impossible.

The Elf King's words implied there were multiple enemies. In case this was the one who wounded the Elf King, the fact that there wasn't a single drop of blood on her—there should have been some even if she was healed—meant that there was an overwhelming gap between the strength of the Elf King and this girl.

Even if this girl wasn't the one who did it, considering that she was chosen to be the one to give chase, she and her comrades shouldn't be taken lightly. She didn't know how strong they were, but even Zesshi would be in danger if she let them regroup.

This was her chance to deal with the girl alone, before her comrades arrived. Instead of gathering intel, she should seize the initiative and defeat her here in a short and quick battle.

The idea that your enemy's enemy is your friend is just optimism. You'd more likely be correct to treat them as a new enemy instead.

She thought for a moment and then, with a smile to ease up her opponent's caution, Zesshi finally answered.

"—Good morning. I am...someone from the Sorcerer Kingdom, but what about you? Are you alone?"

The girl's face twitched a little. Her shy attitude didn't change, but it slightly felt like she was thinking about something.

I can't read her. I've made a mistake. I should have asked a leading question...With this reaction, I can't read if she doesn't know about the Sorcerer Kingdom, if she's from there, or if she sees it as an enemy. Considering that she didn't immediately attack me, the possibility of her being hostile to the Sorcerer Kingdom went down a little, but maybe she is just stalling like me to gather more information...aah, maybe I would have gotten a different reaction if I had mentioned the Council State instead.

She mentioned the Sorcerer Kingdom because there was intel that the Sorcerer King had a Dark Elf as one of his retainers.

They didn't get this information by sending spies into the Sorcerer Kingdom's internal organization.

It was because the Thousand-League Astrologer had confirmed the presence of a dark elf girl beside the Sorcerer King in the battle against the Kingdom on the Katze Plains.

They made a detailed report on the Sorcerer King and his forces after using illusions to recreate the scene the Thousand-League Astrologer saw. They also saw the dark elf who was the only one attending him through the illusions, but they weren't able to see her face clearly due to the blurriness.

That was something that couldn't be helped. The Thousand-League Astrologer couldn't divert her energy to remember a single person as she had to observe the entire battlefield. Plus, what happened after made such a strong impression on her that a lot of other information had flown straight out of her mind.

Remembering that vague picture, it felt like this girl wasn't the same one as the dark elf that followed the Sorcerer King back then. They both held a black staff but the armor they wore was completely different. Well, there was also the fact that she didn't remember anything except for the gear because the illusion was of very low quality.

If this girl really was from the Sorcerer Kingdom, what would she have chosen to wear when she planned to come here? The answer: she would have been completely geared up just like Zesshi was. This was a battlefield. Anything could happen here so it was impossible that someone would appear in their usual attire. Even the defensive gear Kaire and the Thousand-League Astrologer wore were chosen only for their ability, disregarding the fact of whether they suited them or not.

That said, the Katze Plains had been a battlefield as well. Truly strong people didn't use multiple sets of serious battle gear generally.

That was because excellent gear was a necessity to ascend to higher tiers of strength, and they would need to polish their skill with a single piece of equipment for that. For example, there was someone skilled with a club who was given an axe after they were recruited into Black Scripture, they had to spend years to get proficient at using it.

Going by this logic, the girl from the Sorcerer Kingdom and the one before her should be different people, but there were too many things in common between them for her to come to that conclusion.

That's why Zesshi asked a suggestive question to reap some information from her reaction but got nothing in return.

I am better at reaping with this scythe though, Zesshi thought and slightly strengthened her grip on the great scythe.

(T/N: the original is a wordplay on 'asking a suggestive question' (鎌をかけ

る) from the sentence before, which literally translates to "grabbing by a sickle/scythe." Zesshi jokes that she is better at using the scythe in her hands instead.)

And there was also the fact that the girl was not human.

Zesshi could mostly differentiate between the faces of fellow humanoids, but she was not perfect at it. There were some things that one wouldn't be able to perceive if they were not of the same race, so the other races tended to look all the same to her.

"Ah, eh, Y-yes. I am alone..."

"I see. Then everyone's probably worried for you."

Haa. She lies so easily with such a cute face...absolutely different from how she looks. In that case, any information I can get from her is highly likely to be false. There's no use in continuing this conversation when I already know that she has other allies here. First, I should incapacitate her with force and move to a different place. It's better to draw the truth out of her at a later time, either through magical means or through physical pain...

The girl shyly raised her hand which was not holding the staff to touch the necklace hanging from her neck.

A behavior like that was nothing out of place. It looked like her hand was just searching for something to grip to soothe her unease. One could call it a shy and girly action but Zesshi, who sensed the disconnect between the girl's appearance and her true self, didn't think so.

"Tch!"

Zesshi reduced the distance between them in a single motion, faster than her tongue click could dissipate in the air. While putting on her helmet, she swung the weapon she was holding—Charon's Guidance—to graze the ground at the girl's legs.

If she could, she would cut her legs.

A no-holds-barred attack with her full strength behind it—an attack even the man who was the strongest of her comrades would find difficult to avoid.

That attack—

Was deflected back by the girl planting down the staff by her feet.

The weapon that could easily cut through even steel was deflected, but Zesshi wasn't surprised. She expected this possibility, but the fact that Zesshi's full-powered attack couldn't even make the girl's hand flinch was beyond her expectations. Then—

So she's a martial-type.

She has now got a clue on the classes held by the dark elf girl.

...Wait a minute? A lightly equipped warrior? No way...though it's not confirmed that the Elf King was his only child...her appearance...

Both Dark Elves and the Elves had the same lifespan, so the speed of their growth should also be the same.

"W-what are you doing su-suddenly..."

Is it possible that she was from a different bloodline? ...Am I thinking too deeply into it?

It looked like the dark elf girl was muttering about something, but Zesshi continued to swing her scythe, trying to think. She had already decided to fight her. From now, there was no need to talk anymore except if she wanted to stall for time or if she had won.

Zesshi burst into the corridor, chasing after the girl who jumped back.

Rotating the great scythe in a wide arc to accumulate a lot of inertia behind it, Zesshi swung at the girl's ankles.

Swinging such a large scythe meant that she naturally hit the floor and the walls along the way, but that was not an issue. The weapon once held by the savior God of the Theocracy—no, of humanity—Surshana, could easily part the walls and the floor in its path. There was a slight resistance but it barely slowed down the great scythe.

But it was deflected.

Again.

And again.

The three attacks that followed each other like lightning struck at the same spot. All of them were parried by the black staff held by the girl. Her parries were not exactly graceful but the explosive power in them was massive. The girl's lightning speed was on the same level as her without a doubt.

She's pretty good. A warrior on my level? This is bad. I will be at a disadvantage if she is completely focused on defense.

She already understood something from this short exchange.

According to the Elf King's words, the opponent had allies. If they were also on this girl's level, then Zesshi could only put her full effort into escaping. However, it would be shallow to think that she could run away easily just because the Elf King had managed to escape. If the opponent was not an idiot, they would have some countermeasures in place now after letting the Elf King escape once.

That meant—

—I will deal with her here in a short battle. Killing her—it can no longer be helped. Depending on the situation, I could just return with her corpse and try resurrecting her.

Zesshi tried to suppress her urge to look at the girl's navel.

Despite wearing a dress-like metal armor, her flat and smooth navel was exposed to the elements. The girl was boldly exposing a place stuffed with important organs, a place that's considered vulnerable. That said, thinking that she could wound her deeply by attacking there was far too optimistic.

The armor's defense could generally be said to be a sum of the infused magic in it, the metal used to forge it, and its special abilities. At the very least, that abdomen should still be protected by the strength of the magic power in the armor. Still, it lacked protection from the material used to forge the armor. There was no doubt that the defense there was weaker compared to other parts.

Then why was she wearing such a thing?

She was probably leading the opponent's attacks there by intentionally exposing it. It's highly possible that this was a trap in waiting.

Despite realizing that, Zesshi couldn't help but slightly hope to kill the girl with a single hit by targeting that area. That was why she was trying her best to not look at it.

"[Power of Gaia]"

The girl suddenly cast a spell, making Zesshi widen her eyes.

"Hah!? Magic!? Not a martial class!? No, no, it's not like there are no martial classes that could use a little bit of magic…but…eh?"

Zesshi could use a little bit of divine magic, but she has never heard of the spell the girl used. It didn't affect her, so it's possible that it was self-buffing magic.

If the girl's main class was martial and she only slightly dipped her toes into the caster classes, then she needn't worry much. Still, it would be a serious issue if her main class was actually a caster instead.

Being able to choose any approach through the use of myriad spells would make the girl far more flexible than a dedicated warrior at dealing with a wide range of situations. If luck was not on Zesshi's side, it was entirely possible for the girl to overturn the situation with some awesome magic.

Zesshi's thoughts about these spells were lacking in detail, only calling them "awesome magics" because she was not too knowledgeable about magic casters. That was why she had to be even more on guard now. In her experience, even

being able to heal just a bit, like herself, was enough to affect the course of battle.

Assuming the worst possible case, that she wasn't a warrior, what type of magic-caster could the girl be?

She didn't have absolute proof, but by considering their short exchange of attacks, she probably wasn't an arcane caster. She would have been weaker in their melee exchange if she was anything like an ordinary arcane caster. It was more likely that she was a druid or a priest, the kind of caster that was comparatively better at close-quarters combat.

She could also just be an atypical magic caster, or from other types. Psychic magic was one of them, but unfortunately, Zesshi was even less knowledgeable about those casters. There would be no end to it if she continued her conjectures down this path. It was fine to keep them in a corner of her mind and be on guard against the possibilities.

And—taking into account that she was a Dark Elf, she was most likely a druid, even more so given that she was related to that Elf King.

Unfortunately, Zesshi couldn't do much if she really was a druid. So instead, she activated one of the two special skills she learned upon mastering the Inquisitor class. She activated it in case the girl was some kind of priest that could use high-tier magic that Zesshi didn't know about.

"[Denounce Heretic]."

This skill made priests who worshiped a different God expend a little more mana than usual when they used magic around her. It wouldn't show clear effects immediately, but it would slowly start hindering the opponent in a drawn-out battle or if they used stronger spells.

She didn't plan to extend this battle but decided to use it anyway in case the opponent came out casting one high-tiered spell after another. Using a skill like this that aimed for a single, very specific effect was probably wasteful when she wasn't sure about her opponent's abilities, but such skills were useless if not activated at the start of the battle anyhow.

"[Elemental Form - Earth]."

The girl cast another spell unknown to Zesshi, turning her skin to a light brown shade.

Changing skin color was probably not the only thing that spell did. She also thought that perhaps the girl was showing her true form—that she was originally not a Dark Elf but a different race—but it's useless to theorize about that.

She should not get caught up in questions that didn't have answers when in a

battle with her life on the line. Such gaps in knowledge should only be guarded against.

The same went for magic.

When she didn't know what some spell did, it was best to keep her conjectures about them to a minimum. Zesshi activated another skill like the one before.

"[Sentence Heretic]."

It was the other special skill she gained upon mastering Inquisitor. This one also had a similar effect in that it increased the rate of failure of activating a spell. Naturally, mana would be spent even if the spell failed to activate.

As she ended up using both of them, she wouldn't be able to use any other Inquisitor skills until their active time ran out, but it couldn't be helped. She would still have the physical durability and resistance against magic that was granted by the Inquisitor class so it would be tolerable.

Zesshi planned for a quick fight, but the battle went in a different direction than what she had hoped for. The present situation was not what she had in mind. For Zesshi, all paths to victory roughly fell into two categories: restrict the opponent by continuously pushing her advantage until they were crushed, or guard against the opponent's attacks while gradually closing their avenues of offense to grind them down.

However, the girl came out unharmed through Zesshi's attacks, turning her plan to decide the victory in a single strike into a battle of attrition, where each side took turns slowly bringing out their cards into play. Although it was irritating, Zesshi had to acknowledge that the girl was the one who had control over the field. If this was how it was going to be, then she would follow the opponent's script and wait for an opportunity to derail her plans.

"W-well then, please excuse me."

Perhaps two spells alone were enough for her or because she couldn't use more than two, the girl swung her staff with an apology. It came down with such velocity that Zesshi's hair stood on its ends instantly.

She shuddered.

Not because the speed of her attack was unbelievably fast.

But because she felt the girl's heart was not in the apology. There was no hint of it either in her tone or in her expression. It's like she was apologizing by command—like some kind of puppet—

"—don't think!"

That's not the important thing. The attack coming down on her was more

pressing right now.

This attack was not up to her standards if as she had assumed, the girl was a warrior. It was just too simple, without even an attempt at a feint.

It was impossibly fast but it was easy enough to receive it or avoid it.

Zesshi chose to receive it. She had gotten a general idea of her opponent's evasion and parrying skills, so this time she would measure her strength.

Zesshi's great scythe easily held the attack—or that's what she expected

"—too heavy!!"

She should have been able to receive it easily, but instead, both her elbows and her knees were bent from the force. Forced down, the staff came near her forehead.

Zesshi gritted her teeth and with a spirited "hngh!!" pushed it away with all her strength. Even though the weapon was pushed back, the girl didn't break her balance at all. However, the staff's recoil made the girl wide open.

A chance.

Trying not to stare at her defenseless navel, Zesshi activated several martial arts.

[Greater Wind Stride], [Steeled Arm Strike], [Greater Piercing] [Greater Ability Boost], [Greater Possibility Sense].

It was for this moment that she held back from using martial arts before.

Her speed, agility, damage from her attack, piercing damage, and strength were all increased along with her sixth sense being sharpened to the extreme.

She was aiming for a single spot.

Her navel, which looked so defenseless.

Perhaps it was a trap, but she was confident enough in her ability to break through it if there was one. And most of all, she couldn't resist the hope that she could wound the girl seriously enough to completely turn the tides of the battle to her side. Zesshi had a reason to resolve this battle quickly.

She shrunk the distance between them at lightning speed and swung her weapon so fast that the sound left behind by the scythe cutting through the air couldn't catch up with the blade. She then directly hit the girl's soft navel.

Zesshi's sudden acceleration due to the rise in her abilities surprised the girl, who couldn't defend herself in time. After some resistance that was more than what she expected—hard enough to make her doubt if it was really skin—her scythe broke through and smoothly pierced her skin.

Yes!

She couldn't help but smile.

Zesshi had a class called Executioner. It greatly increased the damage from a critical hit and sometimes even killed the opponent in a single hit. Originally, it also had the ability to deepen wounds from slashing weapons, but because she used the middle blade to pierce her instead of slashing her with the crescent blades that extended to the sides like wings, that ability wouldn't trigger in this case. Even so, this attack should have damaged the girl considerably.

However, her joyful expression soon turned serious.

The feeling that she got from her weapon was too strange.

Especially because she couldn't feel the sensation of her innards being cut.

Before she could understand the reason, a black silhouette appeared in her peripheral vision.

"[Instant Counter]!"

But it was too late. Just too late.

Even though it was only for a moment, her getting caught up in feeling her weapon was a mistake.

Gah! A loud sound echoed.

Her head received a hard blow from the weapon with a tremendous force behind it.

She immediately used pain suppression and jumped back a great distance using [Greater Wind Stride]. At the same time, she forcefully pulled back the great scythe, dealing more damage to the girl in the process.

Her scalp had probably split from the strong blow as blood started to trickle down Zesshi's face. Even though she was suppressing the pain with a martial art, just moving her face was enough to make pain rush through her, making her light-headed.

Zesshi was wearing the armor of the one known as the God of the Wind. Despite that, she took enough damage to make her legs unstable. It had been a long time since she was wounded to such an extent.

"—[Heavy Recover]"

While Maintaining enough distance that the opponent couldn't reach her in a single step, Zesshi cast the highest tier magic she could use to heal herself. It was far from healing her completely, but it should be good enough as first aid for the time being. While she cast the spell, she continued to observe the girl, guarding against a follow-up attack.

And then she widened her eyes.

Putting aside the matter of her innards, the girl's abdomen wasn't even bleeding. Still, it's not like she was completely unhurt, evident by her face twisting in pain and the large gash in her earthen-colored skin.

"P-painful."

The girl took a scroll out of nowhere and activated it.

"[Heal]."

It's a spell from a higher tier than the one she used.

—Sixth tier! Why, such a scroll! This is bad! She probably healed most of her damage from that. I don't know how much health she has remaining but I am probably the one with more damage unhealed! And, the feel of that abdomen... considering that extreme hardness, it really was a trap!

The defense provided by the armor's enchantment probably had the attribute to negate critical hits in that part, but it looked like the girl still felt the pain of getting stabbed in the stomach. The trap worked splendidly at leading her opponent's attacks to that part, but it seemed like the girl would have to pay the price of pain for it.

Zesshi clicked her tongue, wondering what wicked person could make this kind of armor. If they knew they were going to be targeted there, they should have added pain resistance to it. This was no different than cursed armor.

Zesshi wanted to furiously scratch her head from irritation, but suppressed the urge. She didn't want to do anything that would increase the pain, but she didn't have the option to do that anyway.

She couldn't feel happy that she made her opponent use a sixth-tier spell. She was not certain that was the last scroll the girl had. Maybe she had multiple stowed away. In that case, there was no chance of Zesshi winning if she fought like usual. But, she had a trump card that could kill the girl, however many scrolls of [Heal] she might have.

That said, she shouldn't use it yet. She should try other methods first.

First of all, she probably wouldn't have used [Heal] for just a scratch. So, considering that she could attack the girl to deal a lot of damage, she should just continue attacking without giving her a chance to use [Heal].

After deciding on that plan, Zesshi took a stance with the great scythe again. While the martial arts that raised her abilities were still active, she approached the girl in a single move.

She would aim for the wrists next.

What!

The girl didn't look like she was going to avoid it.

Previously, it was because she wasn't able to catch up with the sudden increase in Zesshi's abilities, but this time it was different. It felt like she didn't even intend to defend. For a moment, the previous exchange of blows surfaced in Zesshi's mind, but there was no choice for her except to attack at this stage.

She spun her body like a top right at the edge of the girl's reach, swinging around the great scythe with the greatest inertia possible and hitting the front of the girl's arms.

The blade went through her body, causing the girl's arm and armor to fall to the ground with a spray of blood—or not. The girls' wrists were unharmed even after receiving the slash that easily cut through all the armor it had met until now.

—it felt tough.

Completely different compared to her navel.

That was obvious because her hands were covered by the armor unlike the navel. Still it was too hard even after taking that into account. Maybe that armor rivaled the ones worn by the Six Great Gods, or maybe she was using a special defense-type martial art.

And the most fearsome thing of all was that she received the blow with all of Zesshi's might behind it with just a single arm of hers and didn't even lose her balance.

But Zesshi didn't have the time for further thought.

Realizing that her right arm was being aimed at, the girl held her staff by her left arm alone and was about to bring it down on Zesshi right at that moment.

Remembering the pain from before, Zesshi desperately moved her body using [Instant Counter] and [Evasion] to avoid it.

She didn't have the time or the space needed to draw the great scythe back to parry that.

But she couldn't avoid it.

Even if she had adjusted her body with the [Instant Counter], it was difficult to avoid the attack even if she used the martial art at the same time.

Zesshi's arm was struck by the blow, but she was ready for it, unlike last time. She was able to activate a martial art at the same time.

[Greater Reinforce Defense].

It was a martial art that increased defense. [Reinforce Hide] was better at reducing damage, but as a Half-Elf, Zesshi didn't have a hide to speak of.

Despite using a martial art, the pain from the blow coursed through the depths of Zesshi's body nonetheless. [Greater Reinforce Defense] was nothing but mere consolation. Perhaps it eased the pain just a little bit compared to the previous strike, but that's about it.

She killed the whimper that rose up her throat as she didn't want to let the opponent know she was hurt. But—

This is bad...

The exchange this time confirmed the girl's intentions.

Thinking back, she had been doing the same since the start.

The girl matched her attack for attack. It felt like the girl would bruise her own fist to break her opponent's jaw.

It was possible that she was doing this because she couldn't hit Zesshi if they fought normally, but that was probably not the case. The girl intentionally chose to fight in this way.

She is confident about defending...a tank like Cedoran? ...That's why she left her navel exposed? Because she will heal any damage with [*Heal*]*?*

It was sound to assume that this girl who rivaled Zesshi in her strength was a tank specialized in defense, who could use magic but was slightly bad at offense. That blow from before was just a bit too strong for this to be the case though.

Or perhaps that staff was a magic item of enormous power. It couldn't be cut even by a weapon of the Six Great Gods, so that was entirely possible.

Her suspicion that this girl was probably the same one that had been beside the Sorcerer King deepened by the second. If it was the Sorcerer King, the one who could cast tremendous magic and who led monstrous armies, it was possible that he would have such stupefying gear in his treasury that he could lend out to one of his underlings.

After putting a little bit of distance between them, Zesshi keenly observed the girl's movements while taking a stance with the great scythe.

The girl stood solidly, rooted to her place; in contrast, she had to jump in and out throughout the exchange.

This battle was slowly devolving into a foregone conclusion between a superior and inferior.

"It's really bad..."

If you asked her who had the advantage at the present, she would answer that it was the girl.

She had received Zesshi's attack with her body and in return hit Zesshi with a

single unavoidable attack every time. Health, defense, offense, and healing magic, she couldn't understand which of those the girl placed her confidence in. The fact that the girl chose to trust the simple method of trading blows with her and healing afterward showed that she was confident in winning if she continued to do so. Though it was also possible that she was intentionally fighting with a handicap to make Zesshi reveal her hand.

Considering that the girl didn't seem like she intended to attack proactively, it was also possible that she was just stalling for time until her comrades arrived. Zesshi didn't know how strong the girl's allies were, but their addition would solidify the tides even further against her. That could be the reason why this girl chose to fight a war of attrition that was sure to accumulate damage on both sides.

There was little Zesshi could do here. The ideal development was to beat her at her own game while playing along with the opponent's strategy. This meant that she would have to hit her while blocking all of her blows, but it was impossible for that to turn out as she had hoped.

The girl's armor was impossibly strong, so she would have to approach quite close to her to be able to land an effective hit. Then, the girl would certainly aim for the gap in her defenses that would be created while she was focused on landing the hit. What should she do then?

Such a difficult question...Should I use them?

Zesshi glanced at the great scythe in her hands for a moment.

Used by the God Surshana in the past, Charon's Guidance was made from a metal that was yet to be discovered by the Theocracy. Its extreme toughness and offensive strength were suitable traits for a God's weapon.

It also enabled the wielder to cast [Death] two times every eight hours.

And there's even more.

[Undead Flame], that added negative energy damage to its attacks.

[Undead Avoidance], which protected the wielder from undead without intelligence.

[Create Undead], that literally created undead.

[Disease], that could cause illness.

[Sleep to the Undead], which triggered a chance to destroy the undead without turn resistance in a single hit.

[Evil Eye], which lets you select an ability from the different gaze effects.

[Death Mask], which defended the wielder from gaze attacks while

strengthening the fear effect caused by the user.

[Hand of Glory], which could be used in two ways.

She could choose among them and use them five times every four hours.

Other than this, it could also summon the special undead, Spartiate. It was similar in ability to the Fifth-Tier summon [Heavy Skeleton Warrior], but with superior gear. However, they were also weaker in a sense because buffs from special skills wouldn't affect them. This scythe could create a total of 30 every 24 hours, with a limit of 5 being active simultaneously. This weapon was an extremely powerful magic item.

It made her feel like it was too soon to start thinking about using her hidden cards.

Revealing her own hand while knowing nothing about the opponent's would push her into an inferior position on a mental level, which was not good.

She should try out a few more things with this simple method of fighting.

"E-excuse me, aren't you coming?"

Zesshi clicked her tongue loudly at the girl's hesitant question.

She wants me to attack? This brat! Then, how's this!

Zesshi jumped backward while activating a martial art at the same time.

After using [Double Air Slash], [Steeled Arm Strike], and [Flow Acceleration], two blades of air flew from the arc created by the slash of the great scythe.

The girl moved into their trajectory.

Yes, into their trajectory.

Martial arts that produce ranged slashing attacks like [Air Slash] were generally weaker than physical hits. Still, one had to be mad to move forward while taking them head-on without a second thought.

No, I did the same thing to that child in the Black Scripture. This would be seriously taxing on anyone's mental state.

The girl only made an expression of slight pain—which looked too fake—when the blades of aura hit her. The moment she had Zesshi in her range, she swung her staff without even trying to hide her intention.

Zesshi managed to avoid it, but barely.

The girl's attacks didn't pass a warrior's bar as usual, but they were always the most efficient attacks. In the beginning, Zesshi was able to avoid the attacks somehow but now, even if she was completely ready, even the slightest delay in response would guarantee the blow connecting with her.

Laugh, laugh! Make her think that I can see through her!

Zesshi pursed her lips into a thin smile and started laughing, loud enough to make the girl hear.

She wondered whether or not she had succeeded. Her stiff smile—got hit again.

It will be bad if I don't preserve enough power to use [*Greater Evasion*].

She tried to create distance between them by retreating backward, but the girl matched her speed by advancing ahead.

She couldn't widen the gap at all.

"[Spartiate]."

Five undead appeared like a wall between the girl and her.

The girl's first blow immediately took one down.

The five Spartiates would need five hits to be dealt with at most, but that was enough for her.

Zesshi kicked the wall and leaped in the air, nearly grazing the ceiling while trying to land behind the girl.

Just when she thought that the girl had sunk her body down a bit, the girl kicked the floor with enough force to break it into pieces and jumped backward. She probably disliked getting pincered. The Spartiates weren't much of an opponent for her but they could bother her enough to divert her attention for a bit.

It was not like the Spartiates had been able to damage her after all.

After that explosive jump, the girl struck the staff down into the floor, carving out a rut as she quickly came to a stop. Her movements were too haphazard. She was forcibly regulating her explosiveness with her unbelievable physical strength.

What a weird...movement. Not used to her full power? ...or not used to fighting?

"U—n, u—n" the girl muttered as Zesshi stood before her with two Spartiates on both of her sides.

Zesshi transmitted "go!" through her thoughts to the Spartiates. The fearless undead swarmed the girl at the same time. Zesshi followed them a moment later.

The girl took out another scroll.

"[Firestorm]."

Fire bloomed outward like a storm that encompassed everything. The raging tongues of flame burned Zesshi, but they disappeared in a moment like they had been just an illusion. Her stinging burns, however, showed that they had been real. Luckily, the damage wasn't that great, probably because it was activated

from a scroll.

The Spartiates could still move but barely; they were on their last legs. All of them would be wiped out if they were hit by the spell once again.

Zesshi swung the scythe horizontally with her body as the axis and hit the girl with the pommel of the scythe. She wasn't exactly sure because she had hit the armor, but it didn't feel like the girl was particularly hurt from the hit. The Spartiates matched her attack and threw all of their spears at the same time, but a single swing of the staff, strong enough to create a gale around, took care of them. Just as she thought, only Zesshi's attacks could reach the girl.

Taking advantage of that moment, Zesshi again started rotating as if she was dancing, going low across the floor like a spider and attacking with a very low slash at the girl's ankles.

Meanwhile, one of the Spartiates was split into two, disappearing into the air just like that. But, that's what summoned monsters were good for.

She slashed with the great scythe as if to gouge out the girl's Achilles' tendon—sparks flew.

It was tough there too.

Even with [Steeled Arm Strike], [Greater Slash Strike], and her class abilities, it didn't feel like the weapon managed to penetrate deep.

But that wasn't the only reason she aimed for her legs.

Zesshi immediately spread her legs apart and gritted her teeth, she swung the great scythe up with all her effort even as it stayed stuck into the girl's legs. She was trying to destroy the girl's balance. But—

The girl didn't even flinch.

She was like a great tree.

Impossible.

But, that was the truth.

She used her full might with the opponent's strength in mind, but it felt like she would be the one to lose balance and fall forward instead. There was too much of a gap between the weight she was feeling and the lovely appearance of the girl before her.

Perhaps she was using some special skill or a magic item, but it felt like Zesshi was dealing with a humongous tree that had its branches spread towards the sky. Considering the response that she received, it didn't look like she would be able to make the girl fall no matter the amount of strength she put into it.

She suddenly felt cold, sensing something bad was going to happen.

The girl probably found Zesshi's loss of balance to be a good opportunity. She extended the staff in her right hand as much as possible and brought it down on Zesshi in between the Spartiates trying to obstruct her.

An attack with the greatest reach and the most force possible behind it, an attack that made Zesshi's spine go cold.

Her stance was too awful to be able to avoid it. The Spartiates couldn't resist it more than a few strands of hair would, so it was useless even if she used them to obstruct it.

Still, Zesshi sent an order to Spartiates through her thoughts.

Immediately, one of them that was standing beside her tackled Zesshi with its body and sent her flying away. The girl's staff swung down like a black comet and the Spartiate that took Zesshi's place was smashed into tiny pieces.

While rolling across the floor, Zesshi gracefully adjusted her weapon and freed it from the girl's legs. In the same motion, she quickly stood up, holding the great scythe in front of her as if to hold back the girl.

But the girl didn't follow with an attack on Zesshi. With a violent motion of her body, black winds raged and the Spartiates were blown away into pieces.

Amidst the scraps of bone disappearing mid-air, the girl stood calmly, readjusting her grip on the staff. Then, she started fidgeting like she just remembered something.

Should I summon Spartiates again?...But, I have to confirm something first.

Zesshi started spinning the great scythe above her with a deliberate motion. The sound of the blades cutting through the air filled the room. The girl stood still, observing, taking on a completely defensive stance.

Little by little, by a nail's length each time, Zesshi approached the girl.

With the distance reduced—

Zesshi took a sharp breath and swung the considerably accelerated great scythe towards the girl's left wrist.

The girl wasn't slow when compared to the blades that were so fast that they physically slashed the air apart. Instead, it felt like she intended to take the hit again like a machine while getting ready to land a blow on Zesshi. Perhaps she had already gotten used to Zesshi's speed, as she didn't falter in her movements.

But—the blades that originally parted apart the air to aim at the wrist suddenly arced upwards.

A change in the pattern repeated till now.

Zesshi was aiming for the neck this time.

Would the girl die if she sent her neck flying? Improbable, considering what she felt from the previous hits. However, her neck was exposed just like her navel. It could be a trap as well but if she managed to hit her, it would be highly likely that she could hurt her just like when she cut her abdomen. If she did manage to do that, she could probably wound her enough to turn the tide of the battle with all of her class skills put to use in a single strike.

From their exchanges till now, Zesshi understood that she was the better fighter. It was for this very moment that she didn't use any feints till now, she only used simple attacks. The girl who got used to Zesshi's simple-minded attacks would be taken by surprise by the sudden change just like when she used martial arts before, and would fail to defend her neck.

The great scythe slashed the girl's neck. And—

"Guh!"

–Zesshi caught the staff's blow in return.

She endured the pain but still ended up letting out a whimper.

Zesshi took a great leap back and then widened her eyes.

"...not again."

There wasn't even a drop of blood coming out from the girl's neck, but there was a faint slash mark left behind.

It was impossible for the girl to be unhurt, maybe she had an ability that nullifies strikes at vulnerable points. In that case, many of the skills Zesshi had learned wouldn't even trigger.

Is she even really alive? Maybe...is she an undead made by the Sorcerer King?

The girl probably sensed Zesshi's discomposure as she hesitantly put a proposal forward.

"E-excuse me. W-won't you, surrender, please? Y-you see. I will not cause you any more pain if you do that, and will guarantee your safety afterward."

Zesshi's impression of that was—nauseous, to say the least.

It had been the same since before, but she couldn't even sense a hint of hostility or killing intent from the girl's attacks. Whether this could be considered gentleness or something different depended on the person, but it was hard to think that the opponent was being gentle when she was trying to cave her head in just because she wasn't being hostile or showing killing intent.

Zesshi felt disgusted from the bottom of her heart by this girl. She could be her niece, but Zesshi didn't feel even a bit of familiarity with her.

If the proposal had been from pity or a sense of superiority, she might have felt

unpleasant, but then she at least wouldn't have been so disgusted. She couldn't feel such emotions from the girl.

...It's reasonable if she is just an undead without emotions who is just acting the part.

She felt everything about the girl was incoherent, making her wonder if all of her words and actions had been an act. However, that wasn't the important thing right now. Zesshi's personal opinions on her character were irrelevant.

The important thing was how she should proceed here to break through the situation and lead to a result that was beneficial to her. She could try acting like she was willing to surrender if that could lead to some advantage.

"I am fine with surren—"

Zesshi suddenly turned silent.

That's right.

It was better to limit talking to when one needed to stall for time or when one had won.

And was the girl winning?

—No. There wasn't a clear victor yet. The girl had a slight advantage but that's all it was. In that case, couldn't it be that she started talking because she was stalling for time?

"—Tch!"

Clicking her tongue loudly, Zesshi again reduced her distance from the girl. Even if she attacked using martial arts or from range, the opponent had the magic from the scrolls. She didn't know how many were left—and where she was storing them—but assuming the worst-case scenario that she still had a lot left, a battle of attrition would be to Zesshi's disadvantage.

Luckily, it could be conjectured that the opponent didn't have any means to attack long-range except for the scrolls. If she had any, she wouldn't need to use scrolls in the first place.

Does she have rogue-type classes that focus on using scrolls like this? ...no, she cast something like a self-strengthening spell by herself so it's very unlikely.

Zesshi didn't have any effective long-range attacks either, so she thought there was no chance of victory in fighting from a distance.

Then what about a close-quarters fight?

Not a bad idea. So Zesshi chose to fight like this.

This time, Zesshi aimed the great scythe at the girl's face. Maybe she couldn't let her face get wounded, the girl deflected the scythe with her staff.

Even Zesshi's hands became numb from the force of the collision.

The girl counterattacked with her staff, swinging it down in a large arc. Zesshi easily avoided that by activating both [Greater Evasion] and [Instant Counter] at the same time.

They were evenly matched, or maybe not. Maybe the difference in their ability as combatants—the ability to predict an opponent's actions and adapt one's own to match them—was finally showing itself on the surface, the scales were somewhat leaning to Zesshi's side now. That said, no matter what amount of damage she did to the enemy, the girl could instantly turn the tide with a [Heal] and she would lose in the end with certainty.

Should I use them here then...

Zesshi held two trump cards.

One was a skill that was a surefire way to kill the opponent.

The other one was an extremely adaptable skill.

She could use the latter to either kill the opponent or to escape, so she shouldn't be using that so easily.

Then, should she use the first one here?

The girl showed pain when she was hit, but was she really feeling it? There would be no end to it if Zesshi started doubting that.

All of Zesshi's conjectures till now were based on assumptions, so they could all be wrong. Perhaps her opponent really was a cute girl who disliked fighting as she appeared to be.

Even so, she couldn't help but feel a certain sense of anomaly from the girl.

What should I do...If...if there are others here who are on par with this girl, I am not sure if it's good to use it here...but...Ideally, I'll want to kill this girl before she can reveal her trump card...is it possible though?

If asked whether she could do it or not, she could only answer: "I don't know."

If those were all the scrolls of [Heal] she had, then she could probably succeed, but it was impossible to finish this quickly.

Of course, Zesshi continued to act even as she contemplated. She was slashing continuously with her scythe, but she wasn't able to make the girl bleed. All the while, she was receiving counterattacks from the girl's staff.

Unlike the girl who only needed to stay still and aim for her, Zesshi had to repeatedly jump in and out of her strike range while swinging her scythe, using her legs to control the distance while handling the weapon for attacks. Without such concentration when trying to evade and defend against the attacks, it would

be difficult to defend against the enemy who was countering her while ready to take damage in return.

Though the girl was fine with taking hits on her navel or on her armor, her face was the only part she didn't let Zesshi hit.

Zesshi started to analyze the information she had gathered until now.

Should I just...use it? I will win for sure if I use it...

The only issue was whether to use it now or later.

They exchanged blows multiple times after that.

In return for slashing the girl, Zesshi received a clean hit in her flank.

She was blown away, the sound of creaking bones echoing through her body. Suppressing her urge to vomit from the pain, Zesshi forced her heels into the floor to stop herself.

That blow was unexpected. It was a bit hard to even breathe. Though her sides stung from pain, Zesshi made an effort to look nonchalant, sticking the scythe's shaft into the floor and leaning on it. She then crossed her legs, took off her helmet, and sneered to make it seem like she wasn't affected at all by the hit just now.

She could do this only because she knew that the other side wouldn't proactively attack her.

"Well, it can't be helped then."

She muttered to herself in a light-hearted tone and resolved herself to it. She would use one of the trump cards to kill the opponent here.

The girl didn't try to approach Zesshi, who had opened up some distance between them.

That was a saving grace.

"...you there, you asked me to surrender before, right? I want to ask one thing...are you an undead created by the Sorcerer King?"

"Eh? B-but why are you asking such a question? Don't you want to ask about how you will be treated after surrender?"

"Answer me."

"...N-no, you are wrong. Just as I appear, I am not an undead."

"I see," Zesshi replied and started thinking.

Did the girl not answer immediately because she was confused by the question? Or because—she wanted some time to think of an answer?

In the first place, I asked her that question because I couldn't figure that out from her appearance...that aside, did she just completely ignore how I brought up the Sorcerer

King's name? But, well, whatever. It doesn't matter whether she is an undead or something else, she will die without doubt.

Zesshi put on her helmet again and activated the power she was born with.

By guiding that power into the weapon once held by a God, she could use the greatest power wielded by the God of Death, Surshana. And so—

"[—The Goal of All Life is Death]."

A clock manifested behind her immediately.

This was one of her trump cards that she could only use when she wielded this great scythe.

The skill that brought certain death.

The skill which made one's death impossible to resist.

The skill that hadn't been beaten even once.

"Eh!?"

The girl let out a voice of surprise. A display of emotion so honest that even Zesshi found it genuine.

—What? So she wasn't an undead? Well, I can very much understand her feelings. Anyone would assume that I was using some mysterious skill with unknown effects if they didn't know about this skill. But, you see. This clock behind me doesn't have any effect by itself. It's nothing more than a herald for the power that will be coming later. Really—it's too soon to be surprised yet.

Following that, Zesshi brought out the spells infused in the great scythe.

And naturally, the one she selected was—

"–[Death]."

She heard a click at the same time she activated the spell at the girl. The clock started to count the time.

–She had won.

Zesshi was sure of her victory now.

"[Phoenix Flame]."

She saw a bird of flames extending its wings behind the girl.

Another spell! But, fufu. It's useless. I don't know what spell you cast but once I used this power, there's no way you could stay alive...Taking me down before I could use this power is your only chance!

[Death] was generally effective the moment it was cast, but when she used this

special skill, it needed 12 seconds to activate. She was unsure what would happen if she was killed before the timer ended, so she chose to take a defensive stance now.

Perhaps she found that her spell didn't work, the girl charged at her with the staff in her hands at an unbelievable speed.

The girl who did nothing but defend and counter till now turned to offense, probably because she sensed that something was wrong. In this situation where she didn't know what was happening, she didn't choose to take a defensive stance or just observe what would happen. Zesshi had to concede that the girl had some good battle sense.

But, Zesshi was the one better at technique and grasping the flow between them. If she only stuck to defense without planning to attack, parrying and avoiding hits was pretty easy. Of course, she couldn't continue to avoid every single attack indefinitely, but doing it for a few seconds was possible.

—*six*.

She avoided the girl's consecutive hits. Even heroes, no, not even outliers could clearly see the trajectory of those explosive attacks. It was like she was standing in the same realm as Zesshi. Zesshi observed the girl for a while as her defense didn't require all of her attention and realized that although the girl's physical capabilities were pretty high, she wasn't using them to the fullest extent—that she was not used to the strength.

--eight.

This was something common with those who were strong from birth.

Because their body's capabilities were too high—because they could just win through brute force, they tended to disregard finer techniques and things like reading the opponent's movements. Most of the strongmen who were like that were made to eat dirt when they faced the truly strong. They had yet to realize their own arrogance until then.

Yes. Just like the girl before her.

—eleven. This is the end. Farewell.

Evading another one of the girl's attacks that would have caused cerebral concussion in ordinary people just by grazing them, Zesshi bid farewell to the girl.

The girl made her nauseous in a way that was difficult to put into words, but looking at her now—after she had confirmed her victory—she was pretty cute. When she thought about it, the girl was still too young to understand everything. The sin didn't belong to this girl, but to the parents who raised her.

Zesshi deflected another blow—while ignoring a chance to attack—and then noticed the abnormality.

The girl didn't die.

"...eh?"

Her mind went blank for a moment.

The opponent didn't die from the skill that brought certain death. Then, Zesshi probably miscounted the time. That's the most likely reason.

Excluding the time during her training, this was the first time she had fought someone so strong. It probably made her tense and she just didn't notice it. Counting time accurately in such a mental state would be difficult. A simple mistake.

...two.

So she counted two seconds more, slowly at that.

But—the girl didn't die.

The girl was energetically making cute sounds like “ey!” and “yah!” which didn’t match the fearsome blows that accompanied them.

“B-but how!?”

She couldn’t understand.

A skill that absolutely killed. A skill that killed even the undead and the lifeless golems though even Zesshi couldn’t understand how it did that. But, it didn’t manage to kill this girl.

Her attacks hurt Zesshi, so she wasn’t an illusion, but what else could it be? Maybe that skill didn’t work on Dark Elves or on blood relatives. Or else—maybe the spell cast by the girl broke through it.

If that’s the case, then why did the girl know about this skill? Even she herself could only make use of it because of her talent, she didn’t know everything about it. It was the same for the few people in the Theocracy who knew that she could use this skill. If there’s someone who could be said to know everything about it, it would be none other than the original owner of this great scythe, Surshana.

Was that God behind this girl? Seeing as the girl didn’t die, she felt that thought strangely plausible. If that was true—

“--thh!”

Her body went stiff from the confusion and the nervousness, making her take a hit that should have been avoidable.

“Aaah, enough already!”

Enduring the pain, Zesshi swung her scythe. The slightly reckless attack slashed into the girl’s body, but the staff came down on her before Zesshi could see whether it was effective or not. She began to see stars due to pain, but she put a leg forward before she could collapse.

Zesshi started to think desperately.

Her plan had failed.

What should she do now?

What would lead to the best outcome possible?

She took a lot of hits, but she still had some energy to spare. She was still far from being defeated, but there were the opponent’s reinforcements to think about. She had to decide whether to continue the fight or run away.

Then, if she decided to run, would she be able to succeed with her speed? She was not sure. In that case—

—Should I reveal the other trump card?

It was not a bad idea, but what she experienced just now made Zesshi hesitate.

The girl already broke through a skill previously thought invincible.

It was hard to imagine that this skill would get nullified as well, but maybe the girl could just disperse it with some other awesome magic.

—how many scrolls she has, and what magic can she use?! There just isn't enough information!

She hesitated to reveal all her cards while still not having read the opponent's hand. However, just as she had thought before, time was the girl's ally and her own enemy here.

Although she could bear the pain still, it continued to dull her thoughts.

Zesshi's smile deepened.

Smiles could completely hide her sentiments, thoughts, and emotions from everyone—especially from the enemy.

So she smiled, and came to a decision.

—I won't think anymore! No amount of thinking is useful in this situation without enough information!

The only thing Zesshi was clear about was that on top of her revealing one of her cards, the opponent also got proof that they had a way to deal with the said skill. Just this alone was a greater loss for Zesshi than all the damage she had received until now.

On activating the final trump card, light coalesced into another Zesshi.

Zesshi held two trump cards.

One is certain death—or to be more precise, her power made it possible to draw out the trump cards of the former wielders of the equipment she held.

The other was from the class she acquired—Lesser Valkyrie/Almighty—a clone.

Einherjar.

It was slightly weaker than Zesshi, but still an overwhelmingly powerful summon as Zesshi was considerably strong herself.

The girl widened her eyes again, letting out an "eh!" from surprise. However, it was Zesshi who felt a bad premonition, finding the girl's reaction similar to the one when she revealed her first trump card.

Before Zesshi could even send a single command to her clone—the Einherjar—the girl took out a globe.

The next moment, a huge earth elemental—which found the corridor a little

too cramped to stand in normally—appeared beside the girl.

Zesshi was confused again.

She thought that it was highly likely that the girl was a druid, but instead of using spells, she used a magic item to summon the elemental.

Especially since the elemental didn't seem too strong.

She can't summon elementals and she can't use offensive magic either...a self-strengthening type druid? Or am I missing or misunderstanding something crucial? ...I heard that the one used by the Elf King was a huge earth elemental...is this the one? But...it doesn't feel...that huge?

The earth elemental that was rumored to be used by the Elf King was supposed to be overwhelmingly strong, something not even outliers could win against.

Compared to that, the elemental before her was too weak. That said, what appeared to be weak to someone as strong as Zesshi could appear overwhelmingly strong to weaker people.

An elemental this weak wasn't too much of an issue.

Zesshi was fine with leaving the summon to Einherjar and fighting the girl herself. It would probably take down the elemental quickly, and then it would be two against one.

...No, let's take down the elemental together in one go.

"Let's go!"

Zesshi charged ahead and attacked the elemental with her scythe. Einherjar did the same.

Earth elementals had resistance against physical attacks, but the difference in the strength between them was simply too great. The blades left deep gashes in its hard exterior.

Naturally, for something that was known for its durability, an attack or two wasn't enough to kill it.

But the earth elemental disappeared unexpectedly.

"—huh?"

She didn't understand at all. It's not like they took it down.

The very next moment, another earth elemental appeared before them. This one was larger than the one before.

What was this even?

Zesshi didn't feel like it was the same as the one before.

"Don't tell me it's a sacrificial summon!"

She never heard of such a spell or special skill, but that phrase was just too

appropriate for the situation that she ended up shouting it.

She was unsure if this was really a new summon, but the elemental was certainly stronger than the one before. Not even outliers could win against this one. But—

I can...is it the right thing to do though?

Would this earth elemental become even stronger after taking damage or after getting destroyed?

Zesshi thought that was impossible however which way you might look at it, but she wasn't completely sure at the same time.

She made the Einherjar stand by and observed the girl.

The girl was only taking hesitant peeks from behind the earth elemental, and the elemental itself didn't try to attack them immediately.

Who is this child really? I can assume that the Sorcerer King made her if she was an undead but if she really was just a Dark Elf child... How exactly has such a child been hidden till now? With this kind of strength, she should have been more famous, right? Or, was she hidden by some country till now, just like me?

The Sorcerer Kingdom was founded only a few years ago.

The Empire declared that the area around it originally belonged to the Sorcerer Kingdom in the past, but the Theocracy—which existed for a long time—knew it to be a shoddy lie.

There never was a Sorcerer Kingdom or a Sorcerer King in this land in the past.

The Sorcerer King suddenly appeared out of nowhere so there were some unconfirmed theories that he was an existence like the past Gods...but, no way, right? Though...if that really was true...then this girl's the same? No, considering the mark of royalty in her eyes, she was more likely to be related to that guy. Did the Sorcerer King come up with a plan to come over here from a faraway place and unite the non-humans after he got his hands on this girl?

She just didn't know, and she had no proof either. She found it difficult to even imagine that this girl was related to the Sorcerer King.

But, she should assume the worst-case scenario here: that there was a possibility for that to really be the truth.

If this girl really belongs to the Sorcerer Kingdom...then it means that the Sorcerer Kingdom had at least two people on par with me including this girl...no way, is the Sorcerer King here too?

Zesshi started panicking.

How stupid had she been? She had thought about the possibility of the girl

being related to the Sorcerer Kingdom, so she should also have thought about this possibility.

Normally, it's impossible.

No amount of lives would be enough for a king to come to the battlefield where two other countries were fighting their decisive battle. Yet, didn't the Sorcerer King do just that, going and doing whatever he liked in the Holy Kingdom? He made every country realize that a magic caster capable of destroying armies could appear anywhere now.

Plus, they also received the hard-to-believe report that he had appeared in the arena as a gladiator right before the Empire became their vassal. Then, it was completely believable that he would come to this Elven Country moments before its fall.

Zesshi fiercely admonished herself.

It would be the worst if the Sorcerer King was here as well as she had surmised. This girl alone was enough of a problem, the addition of that undead would wipe away any chance of victory she might have had. The Theocracy had yet to complete its analysis of the Sorcerer King's true strength, but it was hard to think that someone who could annihilate an army of over a hundred thousand soldiers could be weaker than this girl.

At present, it's nothing but layering conjecture over conjecture, but everything fell into place—everything really did fall into place. I don't know what the other party is aiming for, but if the Sorcerer King himself is here, should I negotiate?

If they managed to steal the earth elemental, then that was the same as usurping this country.

The girl had the mark of royalty—her eyes.

If the Elves were shown that as proof of royal lineage and shown the earth elemental used by the Elf King obeying this girl, they would surely bend the knee.

If they also fought us back, they would be highly popular as well...what perfect timing. What, perfect, timing?

Zesshi started feeling even more uneasy.

—The Theocracy had accelerated its war with the Elven Country, rushing it to its conclusion only because the Sorcerer Kingdom started invading the Kingdom, seemingly to destroy it. But, is that what the Sorcerer Kingdom was truly aimed for?

Suddenly, she felt like the different colored cubes of the Rubik's cube had fallen into their proper places, completing it. Just for a moment, Zesshi, who had never experienced any fear in any battle, suddenly trembled all over her body like

she was filled with ice.

Yes, if all of this had been the Sorcerer Kingdom's plan all along, then everything fell into place.

Their original goal was not the Kingdom, but making the Elven Country come under their rule while hurting the Theocracy? In that case, their invasion getting repelled at E-Nauru and the leaking of information about their invasion was not because they wanted to instill fear of their impending doom into the Kingdom's population, but to push the Theocracy into making a move at their desired time? No, he aimed for both? Trying to put both countries under his rule in such a short period of time? Unbelievable! It's too unbelievable to think we had been dancing along to the Sorcerer Kingdom's tune all along...simply impossible.

She didn't want to acknowledge it, but had to assume the worst-case scenario like before.

The Supreme Executive Council evaluated the Sorcerer King as someone to be regarded with the highest level of caution. That, though he was a cut above the rest when it came to scheming, his fearsome power was what should warrant most caution.

But—

Yes, but—if this had been the Sorcerer King's scheme, then the truly fearsome thing was not his power that could kill a hundred thousand soldiers in an instant. It was not the fact that he commanded subordinates powerful enough to eliminate all the nine million citizens of the Kingdom either. It was his ability to read a hundred moves ahead while playing his opponent like a puppet through invisible strings; what they should fear most was his scheming mind.

It was hopeless for them if someone who's already strong could also scheme. That would destroy the only weapon the weak had against the strong.

Or, was it the demonic Prime Minister Albedo who schemed this? Whoever it was...no, wait? ...was it not just these two countries...but also the Theocracy? Are they planning to wipe out the soldiers deployed here and declare war?

It was true that there were some people who would say that there was no problem no matter how many weak soldiers died. A person who stepped into the realm of heroes was strong enough to surpass a few thousand soldiers. But, that was how a strong person would think, and not what an ordinary citizen would think.

The Theocracy extolled human supremacy and united the country with that notion. The intention behind it was that unless the weak humans united and

made the first move against non-humans, they would be the ones to get destroyed instead. And there was a good example of that scenario in the Draconic Kingdom, which bordered the beastmen.

However, were the common populace strong-willed enough to continue to fight if they realized that they were about to be destroyed by this hypothetical person with tremendous power? After hearing of their failure to destroy their arch nemesis, the Elven Country, and that their soldiers were wiped out instead?

Zesshi made her usual smile—the one she used to hide her heart.

It's not that she was happy or that she found something interesting. Actually, her state of mind was the total opposite.

It's her despair at having fallen into the trap—into the perfect scheme their enemies had laid out.

What should I do? Try to let the soldiers escape? Or, escape myself so that I could live?

The death of the Theocracy's strongest trump card would be a tremendous loss for the nation, so escaping should be the better choice.

With her attention diverted to think about the next best move, Zesshi stood still, which then made the girl talk.

"E-excuse me? I am repeating myself but won't you surrender? I t-think it's not too late yet. I don't want to kill you."

It's not a bad idea considering that she might get information on the opponent. But—

"—can't. I can't run away!!"

"Eh?"

The girl raised a puzzled voice. Understandable. Zesshi's response didn't match her question from the girl's point of view, but it was logically connected inside Zesshi's mind.

That's right. There was nothing else to be done.

If this really was the Sorcerer Kingdom's scheme there's only one way to break through it: fight with the ferociousness of a wounded and cornered animal, kill the girl before her and destroy the Sorcerer Kingdom's plan along with that.

The loss of an individual this strong would greatly derail the Sorcerer Kingdom's plan.

Perhaps a most wicked trap was lying in wait for them, but this was their only chance to foil it and she was the only one able to do it right now.

Yes. I am the only one who can save my country!

If asked whether the Theocracy did enough for her to make her bet her life on them, she would feel complicated emotions. But, from time to time, there were some humans she liked. She saw most of them pass away over her long life, but she thought that they mattered enough for her to wager her life once for the sake of the country they loved.

—I will probably die, but I will use all my might to kill her. That's good enough for me.

Zesshi made her decision.

She really did think about retreating for a moment, but if she had to do that, she would like to do it at her own pace rather than escaping narrowly by the skins of her teeth. There was a certain part of her in this battle until now which hadn't been serious about killing her opponent. It was not due to any sentimentality on her part regarding the girl possibly being her niece. Even if the opponent was a mere child, she would cut her limbs and bind her or kill her without hesitation if need be. But, she certainly prioritized leaving with her life the most, until now.

She would throw it away.

If she didn't gamble here then where else could she?

Tomorrow would surely be worse than today.

"Go!"

She bellowed.

Einherjar attacked, following her command.

Frankly, she need not have shouted it out loud. She could give the order silently in her mind. In a sense, this was a poor decision that gave away information to the opponent. Zesshi understood that as well. She shouted despite that to stir herself up and to strengthen her conviction even more.

She made the Einherjar deal with the elemental while she tried to go after the girl herself.

However, the elemental extended its hands out to the sides like it was trying to block the corridor.

Zesshi didn't mind if this was how it was going to be.

She and Einherjar would take the elemental in a rush and then kill the girl after.

If the elemental before them was the one used by the Elf King, destroying it would be destroying one of the symbols of royalty as well. Perhaps that would slow down the Sorcerer King's plan by a bit.

The two great scythes slashed the elemental multiple times in an instant.

Frankly speaking, elementals, which didn't bleed and didn't really have any

vital points, were troublesome opponents for her.

On top of that, high-class elementals had resistances against physical attacks. Even Zesshi's scythe couldn't take them down in a single hit.

This was not the kind of opponent Zesshi would choose given a choice, but she didn't have a say in this matter.

Still, the girl's attack couldn't reach them either with the elemental obstructing the corridor, and it would be hard to get a clear line of sight to attack with magic from the scrolls. The thing they should be more cautious of was the girl being able to cast her strengthening spells on the elemental.

I am the one at an advantage here because they are two of us, but it's not an absolute advantage. We can't go behind the elemental so we can't stop her from casting buffs...but...

She wondered if the girl truly didn't realize this.

Something bothered Zesshi slightly, but she couldn't express it in concrete terms.

The elemental brought down its arms, which were made of boulders. She was about to jump back but this wasn't a situation where she could slowly grind it down with hit-and-run attacks. She used the great scythe to hook the arm and deflect it. The earth elemental's attack had tremendous force behind it, but deflecting it by applying force from the side was easy.

That said, this wasn't a weapon suitable for that, and she was only able to do it through brute force because of the overwhelming difference in their strength.

She could see Einherjar doing the same from the corner of her eyes.

Zesshi's Einherjar was weaker than herself. So, seeing that it was even possible for it, Zesshi confirmed that this elemental wasn't strong, just like she had expected.

This was probably not the one used by the Elf King, the elemental the Theocracy was most worried about.

That said, it didn't mean that the earth elemental before them was exactly weak either.

Someone only on the level of heroes wouldn't be able to avoid its punches. It was hard to be sure if the hit would kill them or not, but it would certainly damage them heavily.

She dodged another attack and turned her gaze to the girl hiding behind the elemental. They were right in the bosom of the huge enemy so it was dangerous to take her eyes off it, but it was far more dangerous to ignore the girl's

movements.

What she saw made her doubt her eyes.

—huh?

The girl was running away with her back turned to them.

Though her running looked cute, she was unbelievably fast.

She ran.

She ran away.

"—!!"

Zesshi realized.

This earth elemental wasn't summoned to handle her Einherjar.

It was to stall for time so the girl could escape.

She didn't realize based on the girl's attitude, but perhaps she was at her limits all this time.

The girl never intended to fight or risk her life. Didn't her actions at the start make that pretty clear?

That time when she retreated back with great force, when Zesshi tried to jump behind her was not because she disliked being pincered, it was because she didn't want her escape route to be cut off.

Her words and actions had put her intentions clearly on display.

"Damn!"

She needed to choose one of the three choices before her immediately.

She could somehow catch up with the girl.

She could defeat the earth elemental here for now.

Or she could escape as well.

Among them, she could easily put the third option into practice.

The summoner couldn't give commands adapted to the changing battlefield to the summon if they couldn't see what was happening.

So, for example, if the elemental was commanded to "stay here and kill everyone that tries to pass through the corridor," it wouldn't chase after Zesshi if she ran away. But, if it was commanded to "kill the woman before you," it would probably try to chase and kill her.

That said, it would just give chase in a straight line and wouldn't use its brains to do things like trying to waylay her.

So, there was no way it could catch Zesshi who was faster and more agile than it if she did decide to run.

If she ran away at full speed, the elemental would wander around aimlessly,

searching for her like a mindless drone.

However, she refused to do it. Refusal was the only path open to her.

She couldn't avert her gaze from the possible future crisis—the Sorcerer King's schemes.

Then, the choice was between the first and the second option.

Catching up to the girl was difficult as well. Even if they destroyed the earth elemental obstructing them quickly, it depended on luck whether or not they could catch up to the extremely mobile girl. Plus, her reinforcements were probably waiting for them at her destination. Zesshi wasn't sure how the battle would end if that was the case.

So the second option was the best one.

It made her resolve from before a joke and would be completely meaningless if it turned out that this was not the one used by the Elf King.

Still, considering the risk and the return, this was the only choice she could take.

She shouldn't be tempted by the greener grass on the other side.

Zesshi stared sharply at the earth elemental and then realized that the girl behind it—who had put some distance between them—turned back to face them.

Zesshi continued to observe her without diverting her attention from the earth elemental, expecting the girl to say something. And then, the girl moved her lips.

"It's good that I conserved my mana."

It shouldn't have been audible considering the distance, but maybe because of Zesshi's Elven blood or because of her extremely high capabilities, she could faintly hear the girl's words of relief. Before Zesshi could understand the meaning behind them, the girl raised her staff high against the ceiling.

One of Mare's classes was named the "Disciple of Disaster," which had a trump card.

It was the inferior version of the World Disaster's trump card.

Its name was [Petit-Catastrophe].

In return for consuming enormous mana, its damage surpassed even the Super-Tier spells that Ainz could use. Of course, it was still not as powerful as [Grand Catastrophe], but the raging torrents of energy born from it was enough to blow away everything in an instant.

The very next moment, Zesshi was hit by tremendous energy.

Bad—will—die. Zesshi immediately realized.

The fierce currents of energy blew away the earth elemental in an instant.

She finally realized at that moment that the earth elemental was neither a countermeasure for Einherjar nor a wall to let the girl escape. It was nothing more than a decoy, to keep Zesshi and her clone from escaping that single tyrannical attack.

And in reality, her Einherjar had also disappeared just a moment after the elemental did.

Following that—

—not yet! I will not die! I WILL NOT DIE!

Though the storm of destruction raging around her was sweetly whispering to her to give up and take it easy, Zesshi brought all her vitality to the forefront to bear through it.

But—her consciousness weakened. She could no longer sense the pain that had been stinging all over her body from before. She could no longer even sense if she was still standing or where she was.

So this was how death felt like.

What the heck is this?

That was the only thing that she could think of.

Wasn't she supposed to fight, risking her life, after this?

Wasn't she supposed to fight with all of her body and soul to protect the Theocracy—her country, from the fiendish enemy and their diabolic schemes?

How mean.

Of course, it was just Zesshi excusing herself. She realized that even amidst her awareness fading away.

Even so, she couldn't help but complain.

She didn't feel any relief at the elemental getting destroyed. It probably meant that it was no more valuable than a sacrificial pawn. Or, maybe they thought it was an acceptable loss for taking out the strongest trump card of the Theocracy.

In the end, who was that girl really?

If she really was from the Sorcerer Kingdom, to what extent were they dancing on their palms?

This was defeat.

She finally realized that defeat didn't mean getting taken down by the enemy's attack. It was getting one's wish, which they put their body and soul into, smashed without a trace and then falling into an endless pit of despair.

Cruel.

She didn't want to lose.

Her wanting to taste defeat was an outright lie.

She only wanted to deny her own strength. Or maybe—deny her mother.

Deny the blood that ran through her veins—and the loveless days it made her go through.

But, if she could have protected what she held dear with this unwanted power...

Even though she would have probably forgiven her mother a little then.

Even though she seriously didn't want to lose for once.

All those feelings still ended up getting crushed.

I hope at least that she isn't from the...Sorcerer...Kingd...

And then—the world went dark.

♦ ♦ ♦

Ainz left the Elven treasury along with Aura.

The conclusion was that they don't know yet if it met their expectations or not. Ainz wasn't sure about the value of a lot of things there, like the strange fruit which was larger than a palm fruit—actually larger even than Aura.

The fact that most of the items were made of materials easily collected from nature instead of precious metal was even more disappointing, but he still held a slight hope that they had some rare or unknown abilities.

So, Ainz wasn't exactly in a bad mood. In fact, he was feeling pretty good.

The goods were not here anymore.

Ainz sent them to the log house near the overground level of Nazarick using [Gate].

He probably surprised the Pleiades on standby in the log house, but he didn't have enough time to explain the situation to them while Mare was still left alone. He only managed to loudly command them to carefully store the items sent inside the log house considering that some of them could be dangerous.

After everything was done, Ainz resolved himself and turned to Aura with a serious expression; which was the same as his usual bony mien.

"Well then, I am relying on you! Aura!"

"Okay!!"

Aura gave an energetic reply, turned her back to Ainz, and squatted.

Frankly speaking, the speed at which he could run was completely different from Aura's. He would probably be easily left behind. Of course, she would slow down a bit as she would have to carefully follow the trail of the Elf King's blood. Still, Ainz wouldn't be able to keep up despite that. He also had equipment that would greatly raise his speed alone, but a change of equipment didn't just mean changing the required part and being done with it.

The gear Ainz usually equipped were strictly coordinated for things like the overall resistance distribution, equipment weight, and the increase and decrease in parameters. He would need some time to go over the coordination again if he were to break the balance. He wouldn't need to spend time if he used consumable items like scrolls to increase his speed instead, but his miserly nature stopped him.

He wasn't sure if he could keep up with Aura even after going through all that trouble either.

So they chose the most suitable option here—he was to be carried by Aura.

Of course, an adult man getting carried by a little girl was extremely, extremely embarrassing. Even Ainz felt a bit ashamed of that. His embarrassment gradually accumulated, probably because the suppression wouldn't kick in with such lukewarm emotions.

But Mare's life depended on this choice.

Mare would win against the Elf King without a doubt. From Ainz's estimation of the Elf King's strength, he had no chance at victory; he was also exhausted and heavily wounded on top of that. However, there were no such things as absolute certainty.

Ainz hesitated to ask about the situation through a [Message] even though he wanted to, fearing that he could end up diverting Mare's attention in the middle of a fight. So, it was best to meet up with him even if by only a second sooner.

Then—Ainz should throw away his embarrassment if need be. It was not a choice he made as Suzuki Satoru, but as Ainz Ooal Gown.

Naturally, there arose one more doubt after that.

How exactly should he be carried?

If he was going to be carried by Aura, then there was the choice of getting carried in her arms like a princess. Maybe some would even prefer a ride on her shoulders. Ainz chose to be carried on her back. No, to be precise, it was Aura who decided that.

At first, Ainz proposed to be carried over her shoulder like a piece of luggage.

He would have been less embarrassed that way and it was also more suitable in the sense that he could ironically joke that he was “unnecessary baggage.”

But, upon proposing that, Aura told him, “I can’t handle Ainz-sama like luggage.” After he realized that it would take some work to persuade her, Ainz gave in.

He didn’t dare propose getting carried like a princess. His mental stability wouldn’t have held.

So, he ended up getting carried on her back.

Having already resigned himself to it, Ainz climbed onto her small back, cheering with a “dokkoisho” in his heart. Following that, he took out a short sword from the item box and held it. He was not sure if he would need it, but it was better to be prepared.

An Elemental Skull created from Ainz’s [Summon Undead Tenth] floated beside them.

Why didn’t he create an undead to carry him in Aura’s place then? There was a simple reason why he didn’t.

It’s because he would need to leave someone behind as a diversion in a critical situation.

He intended to use an undead for it so he and Aura could escape. So, he decided not to summon one to ride it.

Of course, he could just get down from the undead when they met an enemy, but that moment could end up being fatal.

Ainz felt that he was being too cautious, but this was a battlefield where the chances of something unexpected happening were too high. It was necessary to make preparations to some extent—like to retreat immediately with an undead as a wall—for their own safety.

Elemental Skull was more of an attacker than a tank. He summoned it despite that because the tank wasn’t always the most appropriate choice to use as a diversion. Incidentally—

He wouldn’t recommend an attacker acting as a tank in YGGDRASIL. Furthermore, only monsters like Touch Me-san were able to build into being both a tank and an attacker at the same time so he wouldn’t recommend that either. Well, it was more like no one would be able to do that normally.

However, if one wanted to insist that they could, they were free to do so.

Aura sprinted.

Following the faint trail of blood, she descended down the stairs for a few

floors. Then she stopped.

She looked away from the floor towards the direction they were heading for. Ainz followed with his eyes as well but couldn't sense anyone there.

He wanted to ask her what the issue was but decided to wait for her words, ready to command the Elemental Skull immediately if something unexpected happened. Ainz also thought about another possibility.

And he was right.

"...Ainz-sama, I received a message from Mare"

"—I see"

Ainz replied with a serious tone. It sounded out of place considering he was sitting on Aura's back, but he had to use a tone befitting of their master.

"From your attitude, it doesn't seem like Mare asked for help. So, did he capture the Elf King without an issue?"

"About that...it seems like Elf King was already killed"

"What?"

From Ainz's point of view, the Elf King without his primal earth elemental was weak, but not enough to be unable to escape from or be killed by the inhabitants of this world.

"...So there is one more strong individual here other than the Elf King. What did Mare do after that?"

"Yes. He took down that strong individual, but it seems like they are still breathing. What are your orders? Mare said that it's highly possible they are holding some important information, that they could have probably watched the battle between Ainz-sama and Shalltear..."

"What? You mean that battle? ...Could they have a world item? ...We will go there, secure them, and immediately return to Nazarick...there's no time. Aura, it will probably be hard on you but I will be depending on you for just a little bit more."

Aura specifically mentioned the enemy to be a strong "person" instead of "people" so they were probably alone. However, it was also possible that Mare chose those words because it was a group where only one of them was strong while the others were just riff-raff. It's better to retreat to a safe place as quickly as possible when one was unsure about the enemy's numbers.

"That will not be a problem. But—we will be going fast. Ainz-sama, hold on tight."

Aura dashed the moment her words ended. She was far faster than before, not

slowing down even at the corner, but instead kicking off the walls to change directions—it felt like a jet coaster, though he had never ridden one. Although this body couldn't be affected by fear, he felt a bit afraid. Perhaps his line of sight being this low to the ground increased his sense of fear.

He could move at about the same speed when he changed into a warrior, but running on his own two legs was completely different from experiencing these sudden curves, accelerating and decelerating at someone else's whims.

They saw Mare after what felt like a few seconds to Ainz.

Mare was carrying an unknown human over his shoulder, dexterously holding his own staff and something that looked like a strange sickle together in one hand.

He had a lot of questions like "I heard he was killed but where is the Elf King's body?" or "what happened to his magic items?" but they couldn't have such a relaxed conversation in a hostile area.

They should retreat for now.

Ainz, carrying himself brazenly with a serious expression—like he wanted the others to understand that this had been necessary and that it was completely normal—climbed down from Aura's back. He thrust the short sword into the floor.

It was hard to memorize this featureless corridor in a short amount of time, but it should be a bit easier if it's the place he stuck a recognizable sword in. He also memorized this short sword very clearly so he could use magic to connect to here directly.

Then, he activated [Gate].

"Go ahead."

After a shy acknowledgment, Mare entered the gate while holding the human.

Ainz dispersed the Elemental Skull and followed after him along with Aura.

The other side of the gate was where he previously threw the contents of the Elven treasury. Ainz found Entoma, who probably came over to retrieve the items, bowing upon his arrival. She probably guessed that they were going to come through when she saw that a [Gate] had been activated again.

Death Knights, who were likely here to help Entoma, were standing around aimlessly.

"Welcome back. Ainz-sama"

"Umu. Continue with the retrieval, Entoma. Is the ring with you?"

"Yes, it is"

“Then give it to Aura. And, Aura. This one’s an important source of information. It will be bad if she dies. Quickly, but carefully, carry her to the frozen prison. On that note, I don’t think we will have to remind Neuronist, but don’t forget to take off her gear”

“A-ainz sama, may I have a word?”

“What’s the issue Mare? Is there something to worry about?”

“Y-yes. This human...? Was very strong. I cast [Sandman’s Sand] on her, but if she woke up for some reason, I don’t think Neuronist-san can win against her.”

“...I see. Then Aura, you should stay beside that woman until either I or someone else arrives. Be on guard.”

Aura wore the ring and activated it, teleporting while holding the woman somewhat gentler than Mare did. After seeing her depart, Ainz turned to Mare.

“Well then, Mare...why do you think that human watched the battle between Shalltear and me?”

This was his greatest doubt.

“Y-yes. That human used both Ainz-sama’s [The Goal of All Life is Death] and Shalltear-san’s [Einherjar]. It’s impossible that it was completely unrelated to that battle!”

“What!! What did you say!!”

Normally, having a single skill strong enough to be called a trump card was the limit. To hold two such skills was impossible in Ainz’s opinion. In that case, Mare’s hypothesis was probably right. Maybe it was something like a copy skill.

“You did good taking her down without killing her, right?”

“Y-yes. I too thought that she would end up dying from [Petit-Catastrophe] but, it looks like she had a lot of health, so she didn’t die luckily.”

“You used [Petit-catastrophe]!? ...to think that she didn’t die from even that...that human is certainly strong. You’ve been really fortunate...So what happened to the Elf King?”

Hearing about the end of the Elf King from Mare, Ainz wrinkled his nonexistent brows. [Time Stop] didn’t work on him, so it was highly likely that he was equipped with an item to nullify it. He wanted to retrieve the equipment, but he also wanted to gather intelligence from that woman at the same time.

Retrieving the equipment should be prioritized, as that human wouldn’t be escaping from Nazarick anytime soon.

Then, let’s send Pandora’s Actor. He can also search around for stuff that I’ve missed. Or, should I send him to investigate that human...no, I am better than Pandora’s Actor

at that. In that case...

Ainz turned towards Entoma.

"Entoma. Just wait for a little bit longer. I will be calling Pandora's Actor."

After hearing Entoma's answer, Ainz activated [Message].

Epilogue

Epilogue

Albedo, having finished greeting her master who had just returned from the Elven Country in the Frozen Prison, returned to her master's quarters and resumed her work.

Her workload had increased with the destruction of the Kingdom and its vast territories placed under their control. However, Albedo possessed a talent for internal administration, so it wasn't a problem that she had to rack her brain over. As a result of a majority of the cities being razed to the ground, the distressing problems—their occupation policy in particular—had also been reduced to ashes.

For that reason, Albedo was using a large part of her brain's resources to review the creation of a manual they could use in the occupation policies for each of the various countries when they would eventually be placed under their rule in the future.

While it might be possible to scale the one they used in E-Rantel to the level of nations, it was not difficult to imagine kinks forming in the process of broadening the scale and scope of it. In the end, it was better to just apply the methods for administrating a city to the cities and the ones for administrating a state to the states from the beginning to avoid mistakes in the distant future.

Of course, she didn't believe that they could apply those policies as they were in every country. If the races were different, then the cultures and other elements would also differ greatly. Still, they should be able to use them as a broad framework nevertheless.

I'll have Demiurge and Pandora's Actor look over the materials I've completed, and after that, I'll need to get Ainz-sama's approval.

If she borrowed the wisdom of those two, the model she had made would become even better.

I could make use of that girl, couldn't I?...

It was a fact that it would be faster to have her own master, who was full of wisdom and intelligence, look them over right from start—he would be able to perceive things much deeper than those two—but, there was no way she could approve of proposing something that had its problems laid clear at a glance in her position as the Guardian Overseer.

While thinking about that and other things, she tidied up her documents.

『Albedo! Report to the Frozen Prison immediately.』

The sudden [Message] made Albedo jump in surprise. She sensed a burning rage in her master's thoughts.

Once one reached a certain level range, a resistance to mind control was essential. It was obvious that depending on the time and situation, being charmed or controlled could instantaneously lead to defeat. There were no Floor Guardians who hadn't taken countermeasures against those effects.

In spite of that—although it was slight—the reason why Albedo felt panicked was because even though external psychic effects were ineffective on her, the same was not the case for the emotions gushing out from inside her.

She had been found out.

There was an affair she had been carrying out off the record from her master. Could it have been discovered?

Had Demiurge gotten wind of it and reported it to their master after all?

However, it was still in the experimental stage. She hadn't put it into full-scale operation. Would that much rage be directed at her in spite of that?

Still, that was the only thing that she could think of that would cause him to direct feelings of anger against her.

She didn't know.

Albedo hurriedly activated the ring's power and headed to the Frozen Prison.

Her master was standing in front of the cage of a Half-Elf they had captured in the Elven Country. Behind him was the Area Guardian Neuronist and the figures of Aura and Mare.

Her master's expression was no different from normal. Nonetheless, she could feel an intense fury radiating from him.

Albedo flew to the feet of her master and immediately prostrated herself before him.

"My deepest apologies!"

"…Wh-what's wrong?"

From that baffled-sounding voice, she instantly realized that the source of her master's anger was different than what she had thought. That being the case, prostrating herself had been a bad move.

But, she had been thinking about what sort of excuse to make just before she came here. Even though their master was wiser than her, she believed that with enough time spent, her plans could rival even him.

I hope I can pull this off…

"–If there is something that Ainz-sama is offended by, or has angered him within Nazarick, then it is all the fault of my—the Guardian Overseer's dissatisfactory work. I also feel bad for Tabula Smaragdina-sama. Therefore, I believe the most appropriate thing for me to do is bow like this and apologize."

"…No, you're wrong, Albedo. Let me first correct your misunderstanding. This anger is not directed at Nazarick."

A sigh of relief spilled out of Albedo. It wasn't an act, it was the real thing.

"If…that is the case…then what in the world has happened?"

"Before that, could you raise your head, or rather, stand up? I don't really like seeing you, who has done nothing wrong, prostrating yourself."

"Thank you very much, Ainz-sama."

While announcing her gratitude, Albedo stood up.

She was a little concerned about the looks of suspicion that had appeared on Aura and Mare's faces for a moment, but right now there was something more important than that.

"Then what sort of information from that prisoner of war has earned Ainz-sama's displeasure?"

She was talking about using [Control Amnesia] to collect information.

The explanation she had received was that even if her master—who had accumulated a lot of practice using it—were to search through memories spanning over a long period of time, just even just taking glances at them would take weeks of time. If he were to take a detailed look in order to obtain important information, it would require years of time, and if one were to go so far as to alter or falsify memories, it would take decades.

There might be a lot of people who would think that viewing memories was a form of interrogation where obtaining false evidence was impossible, but the information that was acquired was nothing more than what was the truth for that individual. It goes without saying that it was more than possible that even that

individual had been deceived.

If you tried to get confirmation, you couldn't trust them as an information source without peering into the memories of multiple people. If you were to do that, then no matter how much time you have, it would never be enough. Ultimately, choosing a much simpler method of acquiring information was more realistic, her master had grumbled.

It was the same for modifying memories.

For example, if her master had burned a certain village to the ground and the surviving inhabitant of that village, a blasphemous and malicious man who sought power and—although it would be absolutely impossible—managed to ascend to a level high enough that they would be able to injure her master.

It's wrong to think that he could be used after they had "solved" the problem by wiping away his memory about her master being the one who burned the village. While that inhabitant of the village lived his life to seek out the power to take revenge, he would probably talk to someone about his grudge against her master. If you didn't erase everything up to till that point, a huge inconsistency would be born within that man.

Because although he wouldn't remember who had burned his village, the memory that, over a drink, he had talked about how "my village was burned down by an undead named Ainz," would still remain.

However, it appeared they had tried to use it because it was convenient to gather information even while the prisoner of war was unconscious.

"—It's Shalltear."

From those few words, she was able to guess almost everything that was to come.

"…Who is that woman affiliated with?"

"…Albedo."

"Yes!"

Albedo knelt down on one knee.

"Drop everything you're working on right now, except for those matters related to the defense of Nazarick. We are going to utterly annihilate the Theocracy immediately. This is a fight they picked with us. We will have to accept their challenge properly…Don't you agree?"

His tone was gentle. However, the emotions deep inside his voice were the complete opposite. How long had it been since he last showed this much rage?

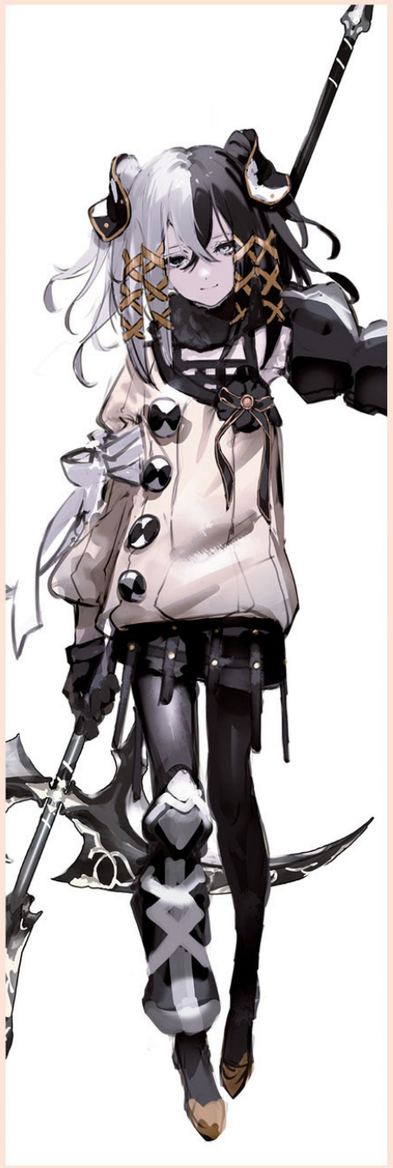
“—Yes. I believe it is exactly as you say. I will immediately relay your orders to all of the Floor Guardians and transition to making preparations for war.”

“Very well. Do it at once, Albedo. At. Once.”

Albedo bowed deeply, trembling at her master’s gentle tone.

OVERLORD

Character Profiles



Antilene Heran Fouche

Humanoid

アンティリーネ・ヘラン・フーシェ

Extra Seat of the Black Scripture, "Certain Death"

Residence —— A district of the sanctuary in Shikurusantekusu, the capital city of the Slaine Theocracy

Birthday —— Doesn't want to say

Hobby —— Saving money to spend on trying new things (food and drink, fashion, et cetera)

Class Levels —— Fighter —— lvl 10
Berserker —— lvl 10
Master Fighter —— lvl 10
Lesser Valkyrie/Almighty —— lvl 5
Weapon Master —— lvl 7
Rogue —— lvl 1
Assassin —— lvl 5
Executioner —— lvl 10
Cleric —— lvl 10
High Cleric —— lvl 10
Inquisitor —— lvl 10

[Racial Levels] + [Class Levels] = 88 Total Levels

● Racial Levels — Class Levels ●

0 acquired total — 88 acquired total

Normally, it would be impossible to acquire the Valkyrie class without being able to satisfy the prerequisites conditions, but she was able to do so. However, she instead obtained a lesser version, which has the disadvantage that her overall ability, and her trump card [Einherjar], is slightly weaker than that of the Valkyrie class.

It is possible for New World natives to learn professions without regard to certain prerequisites. For example, if one is able to collect information at the expense of many casualties, they may be able to acquire the Ninja class even though it should be impossible for them to obtain, like with the non-lesser Valkyrie class.

However, it must be said that the latter is impossible in practice. This is because Valkyrie is a much more difficult class to acquire than Ninja, and it is impossible for even outliers to obtain the lesser version of this class, making it difficult to gather experimental subjects.

Therefore, it would be nearly impossible for a New World native to acquire this class, even with the assistance of someone with extensive knowledge of YGGDRASIL.

Incidentally, in the several centuries that have since passed, the only person in the New World to obtain the Valkyrie class — even just the lesser version — was Certain Death.

After obtaining the first level in the class progression, a Valkyrie may specialize in one weapon. However, from the second level onward, a Valkyrie may choose a weapon category of any attribute — bludgeoning, slashing, or piercing — to master. For example, a Valkyrie that chooses a lance for the first level and then chooses slashing weapons for the second level will be able to use all lances and all weapons belonging to the slashing attribute category. However, the [Einherjar] will be weaker in this case.

Still, Certain Death accepts this disadvantage because it allows her to use various weapons — like those of the Six Great Gods.

This is because her innate Talent is an ability similar to psychometry, and so even if she has to swallow the disadvantages, she judged that it would be more beneficial to be able to master a wide variety of weapons.

She is also able to use divine magic of up to the third tier, but she does not rely on it very much in combat. She primarily uses magic to heal and recover from abnormal status effects rather than to strengthen herself. It was a sign of her strength that she had found little need for her magic up to this point, but it was a fatal mistake to not realize that this would lead to weakness in the form of lacking experience.

If she had been able to buff herself with divine magic, perhaps she would have been more evenly matched in her battle with Mare.

Decem Hougan

| Humanoid

デケム・ホウガン

The Elven King

Position —— King of the Elves

Residence —— Elven Royal Castle

Class Levels —— Druid —— lvl ?

High Druid —— lvl ?

Summoner —— lvl ?

Elementalist (Earth) —— lvl ?

Birthday —— Rabbit year, 14th day

Hobby —— Training Elves

{ personal character }

The royal bloodline is a precious thing, so it should be considered a blessing to inherit it; and indeed, many think of it as such. However, the weak are not recognized as members of the royal lineage, and since these children are sent to dangerous places where they can easily die, there are no surviving children. This state of affairs has led the Elves to harbor a deep resentment, but nobody has dared to openly rebel because they know that they could never win.

OVERLORD

Character Profiles

The Forty-One Supreme Beings

Compilation

Shijuuten Suzaku

Heteromorph

死獣天朱雀

Yokai Doctor

{ personal character }

He is a professor at a university run by a megacorporation in the real world, and he was the oldest member of the guild. He didn't play a hand in designing guild policy, but rather followed along with what was decided since he was exhausted by campus politics and obsequious interactions with students and corporate higher-ups in real life. However, he was not always a calm and composed man; he also had a wild side that loved to PK. He was a spiritual magic caster and a master Onmyōji that excelled at a wide range of magical responses, but was primarily a magical attacker.

Afterword

Hey guys, Maruyama here. Long time no see.

Thank you all so much for picking up this book and for reading this far!

I had written in the preview at the end of volume 14 that volume 15 would be out in early spring 2021, but it ended up being about a year late. But, you see. I thought that everyone would just say, "well, I guess we can forgive you," since volume 16 came out right away.

You'll forgive me, right?

Two books in one year…<back> when I was <just> a reader I would have thought that was a little slow, but it's not something you can understand if you're not in that position after all. The current me (Maruyama) has become much kinder to the other authors <writers?>. I say <to myself> all those guys are busy too, so it can't be helped.

At any rate <Be that as it may? Nevertheless?>, a lot of things happened, and it's been rough. If something good happened then it was wonderful, but I kind of have a feeling like only bad things have been happening in the world. However! Around the time this book comes out, the fourth season of the anime will have already started <airing>!

Honestly, it feels to me like that's just about the only good thing that has happened, but it might just be the least-worst thing that is happening.

It would have been awesome if I could have sent you guys some much brighter subjects <topics>, but unfortunately that's all I've got…

In any case, here's to the fourth season of the anime!

This is all thanks to everyone also supporting it.

"Overlord" is ending in two more volumes! Please keep me company for just a little while longer.

…Though how many years we're talking here is something that even I

(Maruyama) don't know.

However, if I can get the last two volumes done, I'd like to have them come out close <in time> to each other like this time. Although I might need a little time to get things ready for that. But, I will at least put in the hard work to get them out as fast as possible.

Now then, finally, I would like to give my deepest thanks and appreciation to everyone who made "Overlord" volumes 15 and 16 happen, and to everyone who picked them up!

Kugane Maruyama

June 2022

I wrote the postscript first due to my schedule, but I have reached my limit and can't think of anything to draw for the postscript!!

The Volume 16 cover was really rough, but somehow I managed?

Usually it's a lot of fun to draw a cute girl as the main subject. Although with Overlord covers, the creatures are predictably easy to do.

But it can't be helped, since that was the request!

So-Bin

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The world is all yours.